The CHOSEN SONS

LEBRON JAMES *Has the Ultimate Family Plan:*
To Play in the NBA With **BRONNY (AND BRYCE?)** BY CHRIS BALLARD

Sports Illustrated

OCTOBER 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 9
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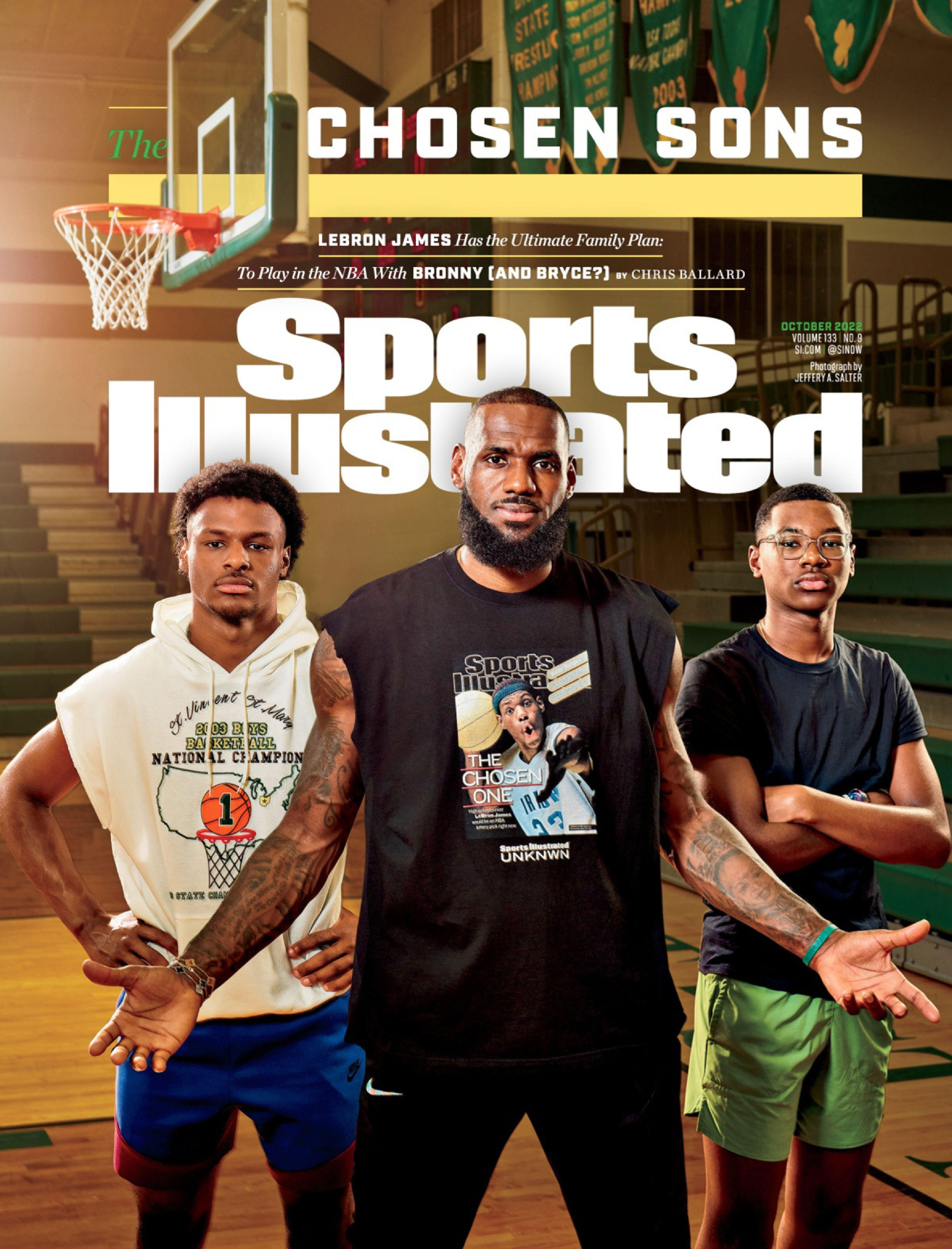
Photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER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High school junior LeBron James would be an NBA lottery pick right now
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LINEUP

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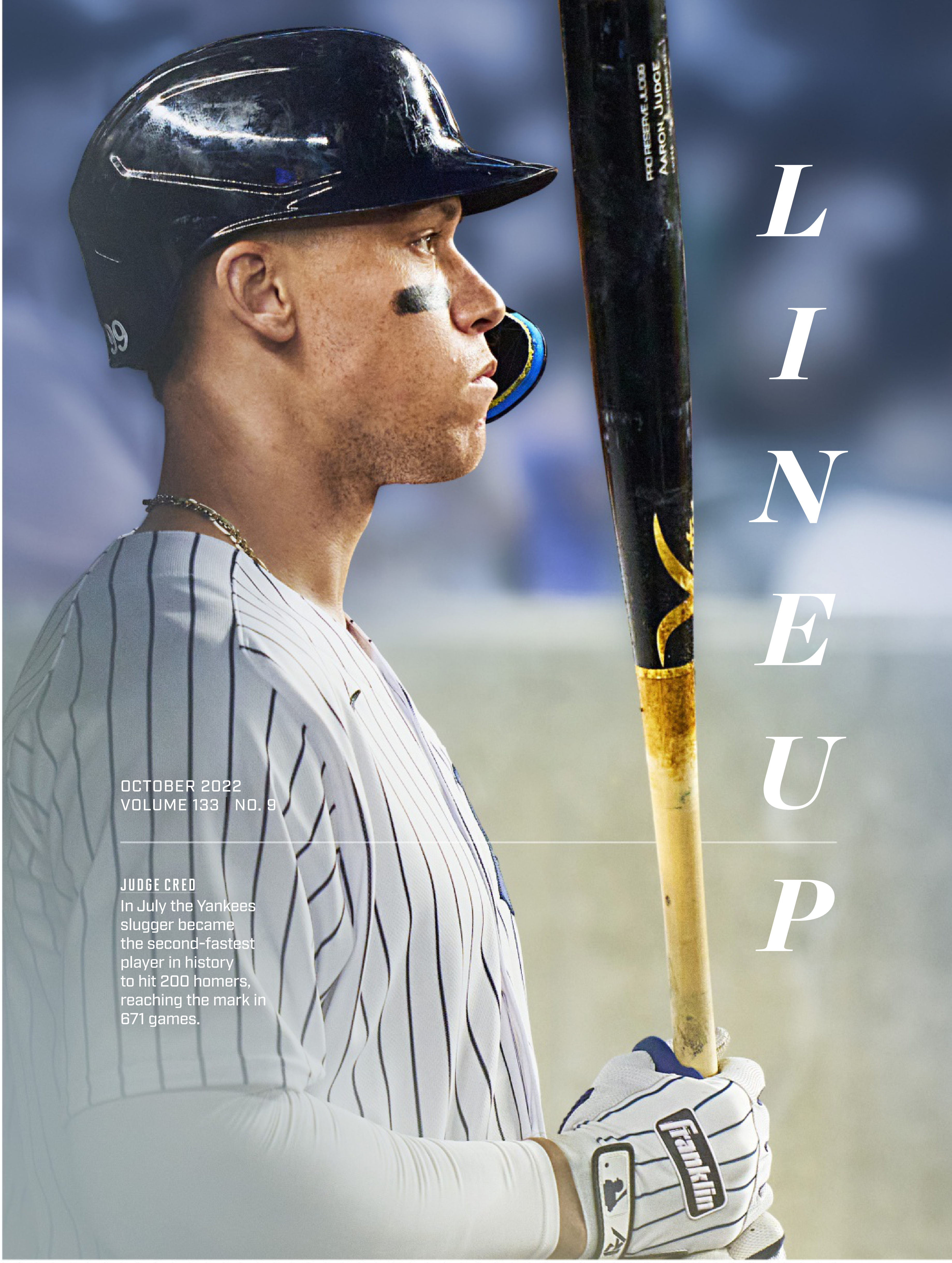
AARON JUDGE
PRO RESERVE JUDGE
99
Franklin

JUDGE CRED
In July the Yankees slugger became the second-fastest player in history to hit 200 homers, reaching the mark in 671 games.

ERICK W. RASCO

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LINEUP

SPOILED FOR CHOICES
Their talent—plus their dad—has given Bronny (left) and Bryce James an unprecedented set of options for the future.

DAVID E. KLUTHO

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SUE BIRD

- 13-time WNBA All-Star
- All-time leader in games and assists
- Five Olympic gold medals

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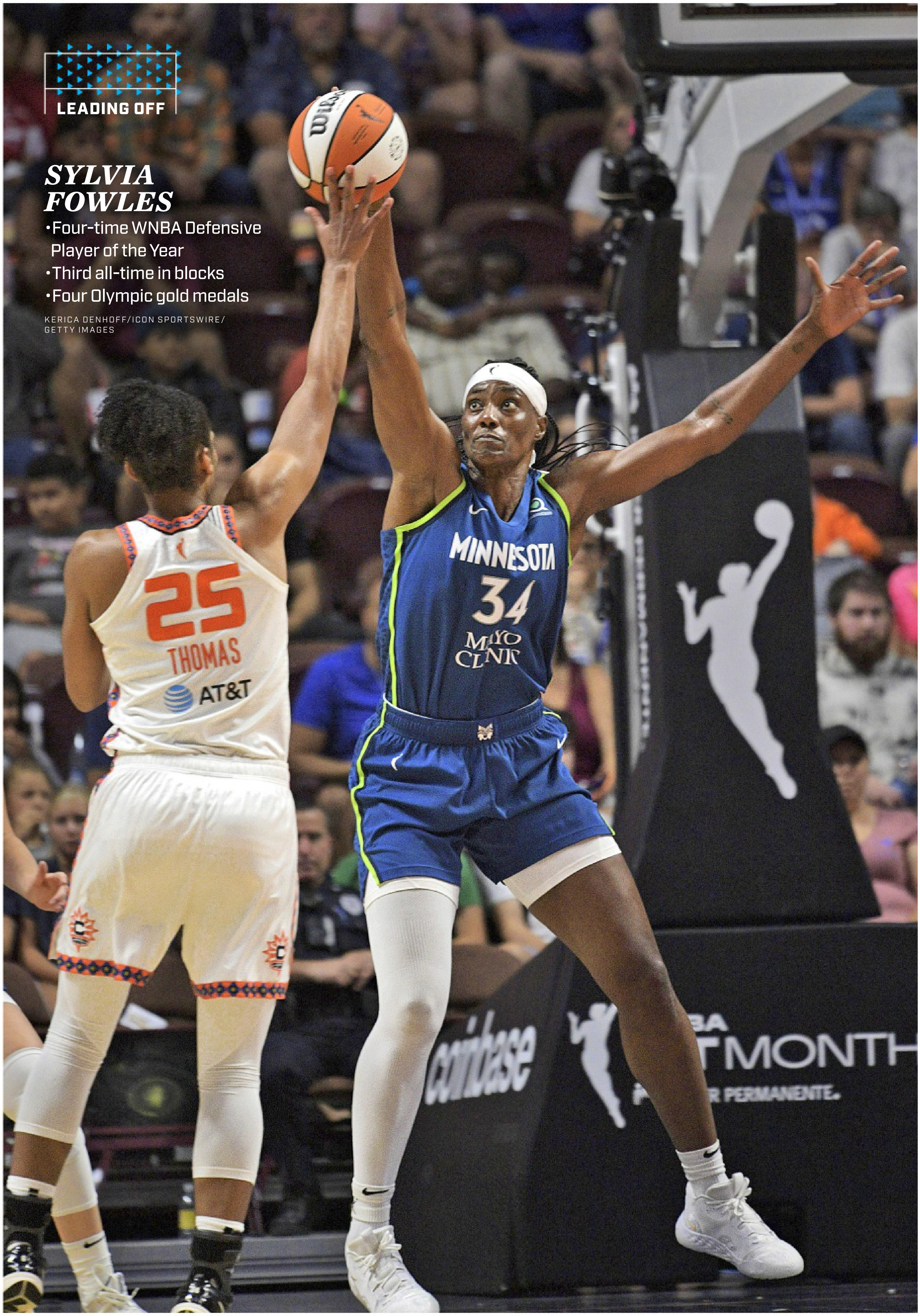
LEADING OFF

STRONG GOODBYES

IN APRIL 2002 THE SEATTLE STORM MADE SUE BIRD THE TOP PICK IN THE WNBA DRAFT. LESS THAN TWO MONTHS LATER, SERENA WILLIAMS WON THE FRENCH OPEN FOR THE FIRST TIME, BEGINNING A STRING OF FOUR STRAIGHT GRAND SLAM WINS THAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE SERENA SLAM. MUCH CHANGED IN THE WORLD OVER THE ENSUING TWO DECADES, BUT THE GREATNESS OF BIRD AND WILLIAMS WAS A CONSTANT. THEY ANNOUNCED THEIR RETIREMENTS THIS YEAR, JOINING A PAIR OF OTHER LUMINARIES WHO CALLED IT A (LONG, DISTINGUISHED) CAREER THIS FALL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SYLVIA FOWLES

- Four-time WNBA Defensive Player of the Year
- Third all-time in blocks
- Four Olympic gold medals

KERICA DENHOFF/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

SERENA WILLIAMS

- 23 Grand Slam singles titles
- Ranked No. 1 for 319 weeks
- Four Olympic gold medals

VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES

ALLYSON FELIX

- 11 Olympic medals, more than any female track athlete
- Won silver in 200 meters and bronze in 400 meters 17 years apart (2004 and '21)
- 20-time medalist in world championships

HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES
FOR WORLD ATHLETICS

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SCORECARD

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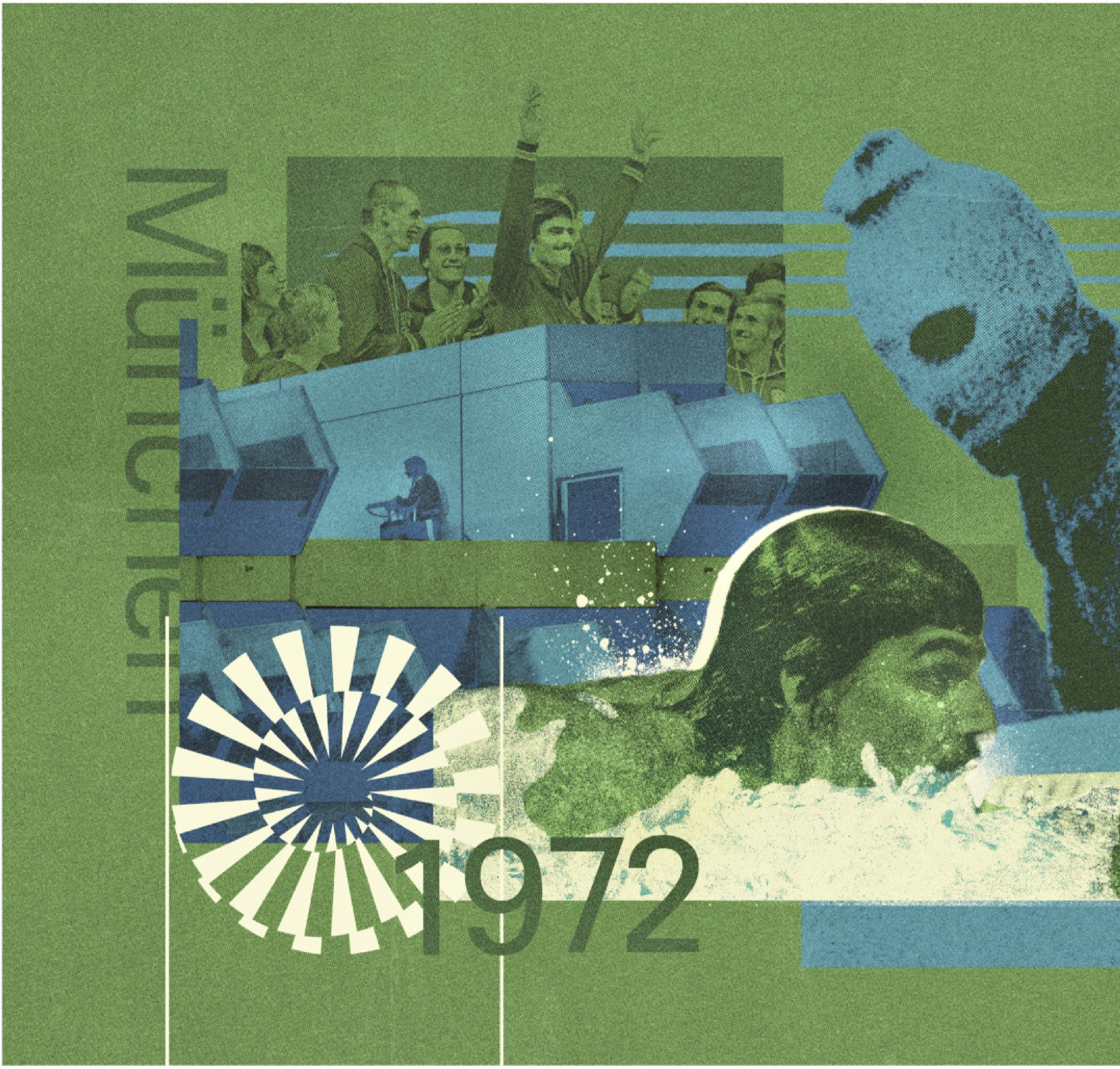

München
1972

MUNICH MEMORY

FIFTY YEARS ON, THE AUTHOR RECALLS COUNSELING MARK SPITZ IN THE SAD HOURS AFTER THE SWIMMER MADE HISTORY, WHEN THE OLYMPICS CHANGED FOREVER

BY JERRY KIRSHENBAUM
ILLUSTRATION BY THE SPORTING PRESS

IF HE'D had a mind to, Mark Spitz could have celebrated on a far grander scale. He could have whooped it up with coaches, teammates and his legion of fans who now were everywhere in Munich. But he wasn't a party animal, and even on this night of epochal triumph, he wouldn't become one. Nine days of pressure—actually, four years of pressure—had been lifted from his shoulders, leaving him relieved and happy but with emotions in check. For him, the cobbled-together, late-night dinner at Käfer-Schänke would be celebration enough.

He had ended his athletic career in glory. Shortly after 9 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 4, 1972, in the final swimming event at the Munich Olympics, the 400-meter medley relay, Spitz entered the water for the last time. Swimming the butterfly leg, he helped propel the U.S. team to victory, completing a personal feat that redefined perfection: seven events, seven gold medals, seven world records.

Afterward, he changed into street clothes and was surrounded by well-wishers in a hallway of the Olympic Schwimmhalle. Rakishly handsome, with a recently acquired jet-black mustache set off by a movie-star smile, he accepted congratulations, signed autographs and posed for photos. Finally, the crush of admirers thinned.

I was covering the Olympic swimming competition as a writer for SPORTS ILLUSTRATED—which meant, really, that I was covering Mark Spitz. On the beat with me were two German-born SI colleagues, photographer Heinz Kluetmeier and reporter Anita Verschoth. We knew Spitz well and he knew us well, and when I invited him to have dinner, he accepted. Anita asked around and came up with Käfer-Schänke, a stylish restaurant open until the wee hours. Heinz was bringing a date, so it would be the five of us.

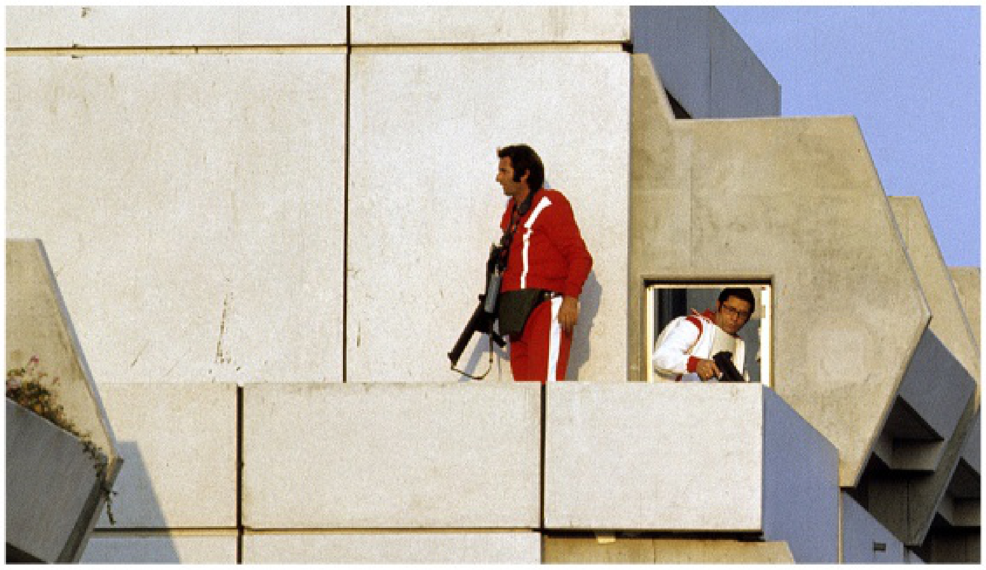
Or maybe six. At the last minute, Spitz asked a member of the U.S. women's swimming team, 15-year-old Jo Ann Harshbarger, to join us. There had been news reports of a romance between the 22-year-old Spitz and Harshbarger, which he laughed off. "I'm too young for Donna de Varona," he said mock ruefully, referring to the 25-year-old American swimming star, "and I'm too old for Jo Harshbarger." Spitz had a mischievous side, and I think he may have invited her mainly to keep the rumors going. But because of the late hour and on the counsel of her minders, Harshbarger declined. He didn't seem disappointed.

No plans for dinner until I mentioned it to him? Shot down asking for a date? This was Mark Spitz on this night of all nights. No worries. He was mellow Mark.

It was after 11 when we arrived at the restaurant. Entering, Spitz was greeted by rolling applause. During dinner, free drinks came our way, but he didn't touch a drop. On other occasions he could be chatty, sometimes overly so, but not tonight. Dinner was leisurely—he asked Heinz about underwater photography—and time flew by.

TRAGIC DAY

The standoff between German police (above) and the terrorists lasted nearly 18 hours.



We dropped Spitz off outside the U.S. compound in the Olympic Village a little before 3 a.m. He was scheduled to hold a press conference at 9. I told Mark I'd see him there, and we watched him head for the elevator.

At 4 a.m., near to where we'd said goodnight to Spitz, eight terrorists, members of Black September, an extremist arm of the Palestine Liberation Organization, carrying assault rifles and explosives, scaled a two-meter-high perimeter fence of the Village. They couldn't have known how close they had been to coming face-to-face with the Jewish hero of the Games.

The Palestinians gunned down a wrestling coach and weightlifter in the Israeli quarters and took nine hostages. Those nine were killed along with five of the terrorists and a Munich police officer in a bungled rescue attempt later that night at the city's Fürstenfeldbruck Air Base.

The Munich massacre shattered what to that point had been a joyous Summer Olympics, an event intended to put a more humane face on Germany. In contrast to the previous Olympics held in Germany, the notorious 1936 Games that glorified Hitler and reeked of racism and antisemitism, the Munich Olympics were friendly, open and relaxed. Perhaps too relaxed.

Munich also afforded a chance at redemption for Spitz. Four years earlier in Mexico City, as a callow, wisecracking 18-year-old, he had boasted that he would win six gold medals. Instead, he choked, winning two as a member of U.S. relay teams while settling for a silver and a bronze in individual events. He was ridiculed by some of his own teammates.

On arrival in Munich, determined this time to keep his foot out of his mouth, he had announced that he wouldn't talk to the press during the swimming competition but, win or lose, would hold a press conference after his last event. Until then, reporters bristled at the many times he told them, "No comment." His press embargo, I was happy to learn, didn't apply to me. For whatever reason, Spitz seemed to trust me. My previous stories for SI had apparently been met with his approval, even if what I wrote hadn't always been flattering. I had mentioned his occasional laziness at workouts and his head-spinning swings between braggadocio and bouts of deep insecurity. However, I didn't dismiss him, as some other writers did, as simply a spoiled brat—at least not in those words.

Often in Munich, I was at Spitz's side. My entrée to him gave me access to much else. If I was challenged by security, Mark said, "It's O.K.; he's with me," and I was waved through. I was his shadow and sometimes his confidante. I knew reporters aren't supposed to

THIS PAGE: NEIL LEIFER; PREVIOUS SPREAD: KURT STRUMPF/AP (TERRORIST); NEIL LEIFER (POLICE); JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN (SPITZ, 2)

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HEINZ KLUETMEIER

get too close to their story subjects, and I'll leave it to the journalism ethics police to determine whether I crossed lines.

Well, all right, I know I crossed lines, but I wasn't wringing my hands. For all the negative things Spitz was reputed to be and often was, I saw him as a sympathetic figure, never more so than in Munich. I thought he was being failed there by some of the elders around him and needed a friend. I can't say that I was that friend, but at times I acted like I was.

A few hours after our dinner at Käfer-Schänke, I was preparing to depart for the long-awaited Spitz press conference. In the lobby of the Munich Sheraton I ran into Peter Jennings, of ABC. He gave me the shocking news. There was now, obviously, a bigger story in Munich than Mark Spitz.

As I arrived at the Press Center it was filling with journalists. Soon I saw Spitz entering from a side door with three coaches. They were in good spirits. I walked over to them. Mark thanked me for dinner. "I had a really good time," he said.

"You don't know, do you?" I could tell that he didn't.

"Don't know what?" he said.

The coaches hadn't heard about the horror in the Olympic Village either, and I told them what little I knew. Spitz was no longer mellow Mark. He said he didn't want to go before the microphone, where he thought he'd be too easy a target. "They'd just take me hostage—they wouldn't kill me, would they?" he asked. That may sound like paranoia, but the truth was, at the time nobody knew the extent of the terrorist threat.

I sought to put Spitz's mind at ease. I told him that what the assembled media, myself included, now most wanted was a briefing from authorities about the events unfolding in the Olympic Village. I said I thought that the press conference with him would be put on hold.

I was wrong. In a moment an official approached, ready to escort Spitz to the stage. I said, "Mark, you do know that they're not going to be as interested in the swimming. They're going to ask you about what's happening with the Israelis."

"What should I say?"

"Just say what you feel," I said. "But I don't think you should say, 'No comment.' "

The first question to him was indeed about his reaction to the assault against the Israeli athletes and coaches. "I think it's awful . . ." he began, adding, in a panic, "No comment." He slunk back from the microphone, wearing a stricken look. Other questions followed, but reporters yelled that they had trouble hearing his answers. Spitz's appearance before the world press was in shambles.

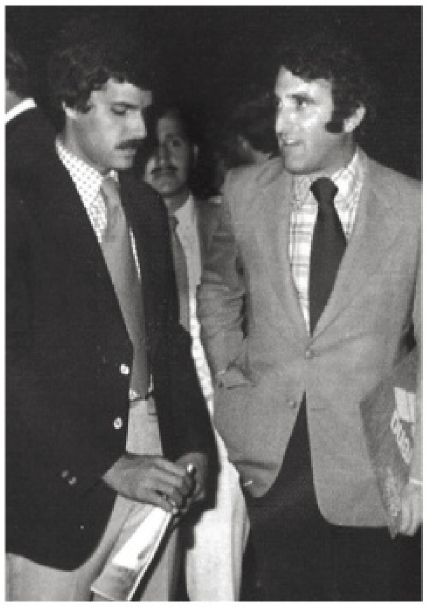
Spitz was ushered off the stage. Outside the Press Center, a USOC van was waiting to take him to a prescheduled interview with German television. I opportunistically decided to skip the rest of the press conference and remain with Spitz in the hope of using my closeness to him more nakedly. I believed that being with him might get me into the Olympic Village, which was on lockdown. I motioned to Anita to come with me.

The German TV interview went well, and the USOC van then took us to the Olympic Village, which was ringed with police. At the entrance gate, a guard boarded the van. He studied Spitz's credential, looked at his face, then checked the credential again. Finally, he said, "You go in." Spitz may have been the most recognizable figure in all of Munich, but the guard was taking no chances.

Now it was my turn. The guard took one look at my press credential and commanded, “Out.” I heard the familiar words, “It’s O.K., he’s with me,” but the Spitz magic no longer worked. As Anita and I were exiting, Mark asked me to meet him later at the hotel where his parents were staying. Standing together on the pavement, we watched the van pass through the gate and disappear inside the Olympic Village.

It wasn’t just the Munich Games that had starkly changed. Never would security at any future Olympics be as lax as it had been in the early days here.

OFTEN IN MUNICH, I WAS AT SPITZ’S SIDE. IF I WAS CHALLENGED BY SECURITY, MARK SAID, “IT’S O.K.; HE’S WITH ME,” AND I WAS WAVED THROUGH. I WAS HIS SHADOW AND SOMETIMES HIS CONFIDANTE.



GOLDEN GUYS
Kirshenbaum (above, right) saw Spitz celebrate his seventh and final medal.

COURTESY OF JERRY KIRSHENBAUM

When I got to the hotel room, there was a lot going on. Mark had been planning to stay on in Munich for a couple more days, but Olympic and U.S. officials had decided that for security reasons, it would be best for him to leave that very day. Arrangements were being made for him to fly home to California by way of London.

The phone in the hotel room was constantly ringing. Once, Mark’s dad, Arnold, answered and told Mark it was a reporter for the Associated Press. He knew he should talk and asked me to help him prepare a statement. I once more inched across the line, but the words that went out over the AP wire were mostly his: “As a human being and as a Jew, I am shocked and saddened by the outrageous act in the Olympic Village.”

A few hours later, Spitz landed in London. Before proceeding to the U.S., Mark posed for a German magazine for the iconic poster of him, hands on hips, in his star-spangled swimsuit, his seven gold medals hanging from his neck.

Following a one-day suspension of competition and a memorial ceremony in the Olympic Stadium, the Games resumed.

Eight months later, Spitz married Suzy Weiner, a former UCLA student and sometime model he had been fixed up with shortly after the Games. Before the nuptials, my editors saw the impending marriage as a good time to do a cover story on the ways Spitz’s life had changed since the Olympics.

During our visit, Heinz and I joined the couple aboard Mark’s new 39-foot schooner, *Sumark 7*. Mark was excited that some of his Indiana teammates were coming to the wedding. “I wonder what they’ll think of my boat,” he chuckled expectantly. He said he was sure they’d be impressed by Suzy. Heinz and I agreed.

Mark and Suzy Spitz have been married 49 years and have two sons. Mark reportedly has done well in real estate. I haven’t seen him in ages, though we’ve spoken a couple of times by phone. I asked him what he was up to. He said he’d been giving speeches. “I tell a few annydotes and if something in the news is bothering me, I give them a piece of my ear,” he said. His occasional malaprops aside, Spitz did a good job as an occasional commentator for ABC Sports, and in interviews he has spoken feelingly about his experiences in Munich.

In September 2007, my wife, Susan, and I vacationed in Germany. In Munich we had dinner at Käfer-Schänke, still one of the city’s most popular dining spots.

I mentioned to the maître d’ that being at the restaurant was nostalgic for me because I had gone there with Mark Spitz after he won his final gold medal at the 1972 Olympics. I wondered whether he had heard about Spitz having had dinner at the restaurant that night. To my surprise, he told me that he had been present, as a waiter. He remembered the occasion well.

“That was a wonderful night, wasn’t it?” he said.

I knew he was referring only to Spitz being there and not to the carnage that followed, and I said yes. ☐

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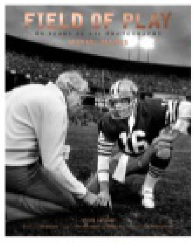
GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

COOL SHOTS

THE STUNNING WORK OF A LONGTIME PRO FOOTBALL PHOTOGRAPHER TRACES THE CHANGING GAME

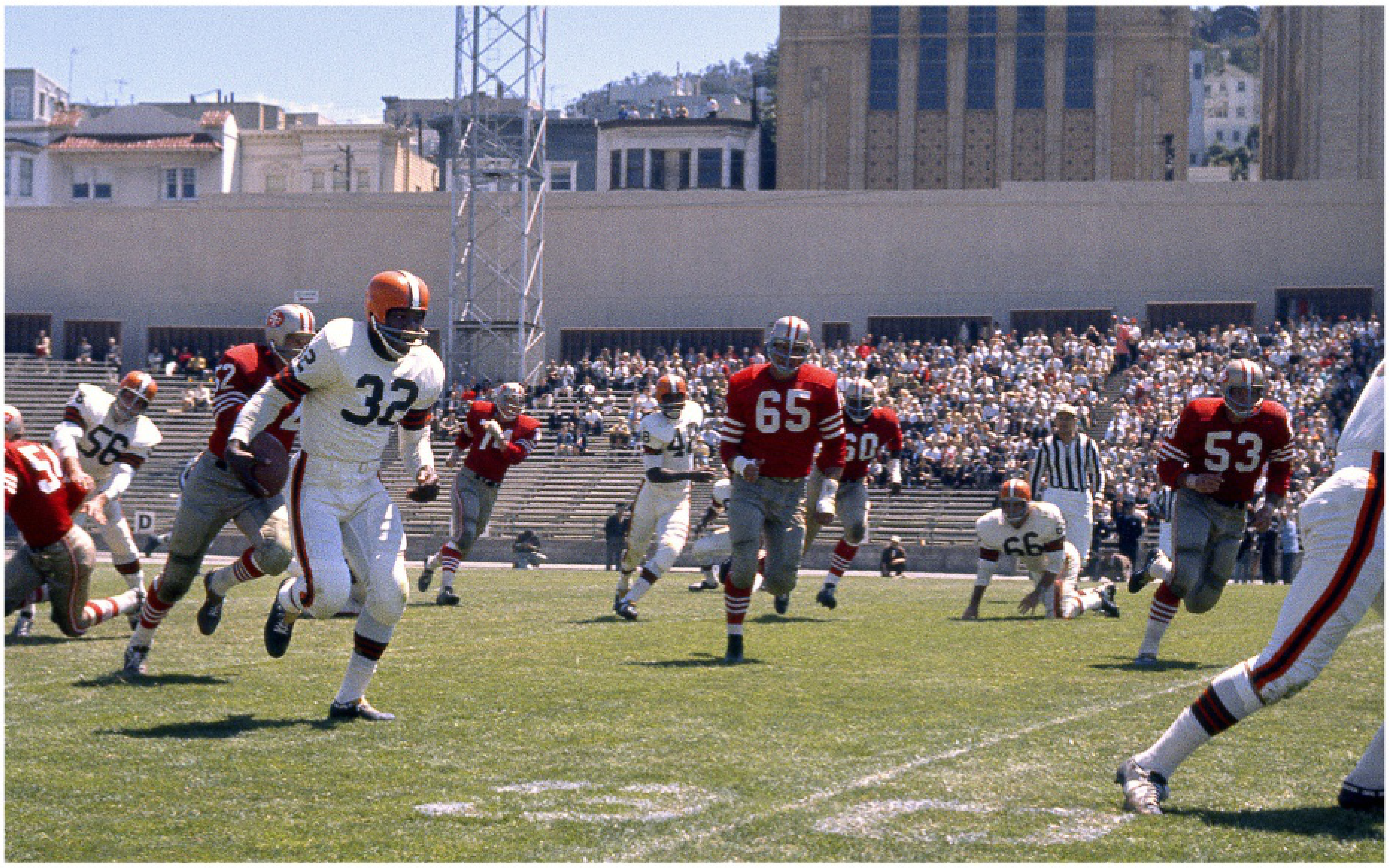


READ

FIELD OF PLAY By Michael Zagaris
Like many photographers who covered the golden era of sports, Michael Zagaris took advantage of lax security to garner some incredible access. As a Bay Area teenager full of, as he says, "a little ambition and a load of bulls---," he'd forge press credentials and talk his way onto the field at Kezar Stadium, then the home of the 49ers, charming suspicious cops by asking whether he could photograph them for a completely made-up book project called *Sunday Gladiators*.

Unlike many photographers who covered the golden era of sports, Zagaris is still going at it. He's been San Francisco's team photographer for nearly 50 years, and his career is chronicled in the breathtaking *Field of Play*. Reading the book is to study the evolution of the game, from when it was played in outdated places like Kezar *(below, in 1964)* to the every-Sunday-a-spectacle it has become. Zagaris has been there each step of the way, using his status as a team employee to get that same incredible access, attained without lying to the law. He's in the locker room as players are given pregame injections. He's under the stands as Joe Namath cavorts with Reggie Jackson (he's shot more than just the Niners). He's on the field as Fred Biletnikoff applies stickum to his socks while actor James Garner looks on.

Zagaris has become such a mainstay that he's developed friendships with the men he covers. One of the best anecdotes in the book—and the writing in it is almost as impressive as the photography—involves quarterback Joe Montana, who was at the time being dogged by rumors of cocaine use. At the airport in Denver, in 1985, the quarterback saw Zagaris and playfully chucked a snowball at him *(left)*. Zagaris ducked and fired back, "Exhibit A!" After capturing the picture, of course. *—Mark Bechtel*



COURTESY OF MICHAEL ZAGARIS (2)

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TONY HAWK FUELS HIS ACTIVE DOG WITH PRO PLAN

The skateboarding legend keeps his senior dog happy, healthy, and active by feeding her Purina Pro Plan Sport.

Tony Hawk has spent his entire life defying the laws of gravity. But there's one rule he just can't seem to break: Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets.

"I think I apply the same amount of dedication to raising Lola as I do to skating," says Hawk. "We try to conform our lives to suit her sometimes—maybe a little too much."

The most iconic skateboarder in history, Tony Hawk is a true living legend who is still adding to his legacy thanks to his unmatched longevity. Even now, the 54-year-old is innovating tricks in his backyard skate park—as long as Lola, his 10-year-old chocolate Lab/pit bull mix, doesn't get in the way.

"She'll sit on top of the pyramid just sunning herself and we have to work around that," says Hawk. "I think a lot of her life, we have to work around what she wants."

Thankfully, Lola has simple desires: plenty of playtime, petting, and Purina Pro Plan Sport.

"She knows, like, as soon as the bag opens, and she's right there," says Hawk with a laugh. "You can actually hear her tail wagging in the other room when I open a bag of Pro Plan Sport, I'm not kidding!"

Thanks to her Pro Plan Sport Senior Formula diet, Lola is healthy, happy, and always on the move and in the center of the action at a house built on action sports. No, she won't scale the ramp, but she will put on a harness leash and embrace her inner sled dog with Tony in tow on a skateboard. Without a pesky bipedal human holding her back, Lola loves going as fast as she can with four-wheeled Tony as her trailer.

"I honestly think that that Lola might have more energy than me at this point because I only really skate actively once a day," says Hawk, "and she's ready to do something active at all times, she's ready to go hard. And if I go and skate and I get tired and I sweat—that's it. That's all you're getting from me for the day."

In fact, Tony says the only thing Lola loves more than skating is breakfast.

"She's like an alarm clock with a slow build—she has this sort of grunt to try to get you up. And if that doesn't work, it'll be like a slight whine. And then if that doesn't work, she goes to the bark and that always works.

"And then she leads me to the kitchen and then it's Pro Plan Sport time," says Hawk with a hearty laugh. "That's really how it goes."

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NEWSMAKERS

HEAT MAP

WHICH COLLEGE COACHES ARE SITTING ON THE HOTTEST SEATS?

▸ BY RICHARD JOHNSON

MICHAEL CHANG/GETTY IMAGES

THERE IS some optimism within the college football coaching industry that the next silly season cycle may be less tumultuous than last year's, when Florida and LSU fired their coaches and sitting coaches at powerhouses Oklahoma and Notre Dame uprooted. But, as we know, just because churn isn't expected doesn't mean it won't happen. So—for now—here's what we're hearing about numerous spots that could be in play by season's end.

AUBURN: The only certainty for the Tigers is uncertainty, and there already have been multiple canaries in the coal mine this offseason. Defensive coordinator Derek Mason took a pay cut after one year to join Oklahoma State's staff. Then, head coach Bryan Harsin *(above)* survived a booster coup back in February. Hanging over all of this is athletic director Allen Greene's impending contract, which expires in early 2023 and has not yet been extended.

NEBRASKA: Things seem pretty cut and dried for Scott Frost: Make a bowl game and he might keep his job. Eight of the Cornhuskers' nine losses in 2021 came by one score. Over time, those results are supposed to even out, but Frost is 5–20 in such situations.

GEORGIA TECH: Geoff Collins's tenure started with hope and hype but has not yet yielded on-field success after three straight three-win seasons. Collins is hoping an infusion of 17 transfers will pay off.

ARIZONA STATE: Herm Edwards's program is squarely in the crosshairs of the NCAA. The specter of an investigation is clearly harming recruiting, and it's only a matter of time before that shows on the field.

LOUISVILLE: If Scott Satterfield struggles, it'll be a real test of a classic hot-seat-coach life raft: the impending recruiting class. In the past, a good class was enough to save many coaches. But how much sway does it have in a one-time transfer-portal-happy era? ◻

SI SPORTSBOOK

Heavy Stakes

AS MORE and more states legalize sports gambling (welcome, Massachusetts!), California remains the largest holdout. How fierce is the fight to determine the future of sportsbooks in the state, where two initiatives (one backed by Native American casinos, the other by app-based companies) are on the ballot? Through the end of June (the most recent data available), the two sides had already raised $256.4 million, making it the most expensive ballot initiative since figures have been kept. The previous record was a 2020 initiative dealing with app-based drivers, which raised a mere $224.3 million. ◻

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FACES IN THE CROWD

Photograph by **SIMON BRUTY**

NYCKOLES HARBOR

Birthplace: **Washington, D.C.**

Date of Birth: **July 5, 2005**

Sport: **Football**

School: **Archbishop Carroll High**

Overall Recruiting Ranking: **No. 9**

IN HIS first year competing in youth football, Nyckoles Harbor collapsed on the field. Harbor was too fast, and his asthma couldn't keep up with him. He scored a touchdown, but instead of celebrating he tried to calm his breath. His lungs huffed for air, and he felt dizzy.

Everyone gathered around him. At 8 years old, it freaked him out.

To help build endurance he gave track a try. Now, ahead of his senior year, the defensive end says he no longer has asthma. Running track helped Harbor manage his breathing, control his speed and assert it to his advantage. The 6' 6", 245-pound edge rusher, who also lines up at receiver and tight end, has become a five-star, two-sport athlete with no intentions of giving up either pursuit.

"I will be known as one of the greatest to play football and the greatest ever in track," says Harbor, the top-ranked athlete in the 2023 football recruiting class.

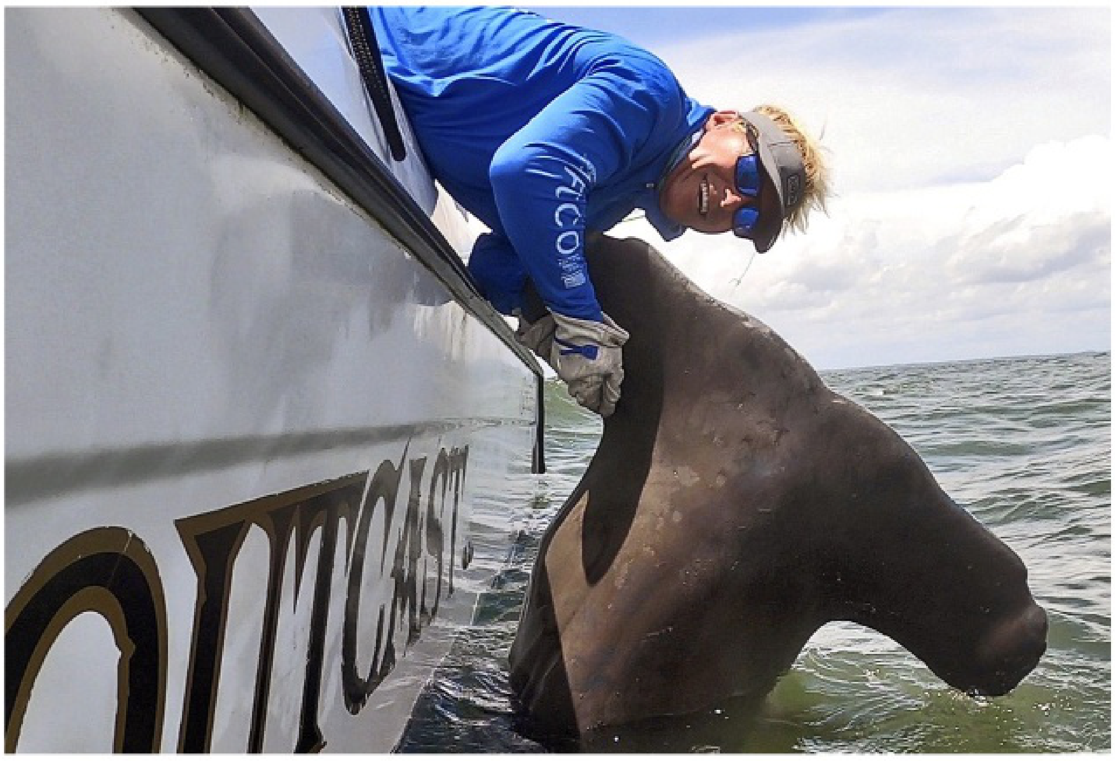
He finished his junior football season with 17 sacks, 31 tackles for loss and a state championship in his first year as a starter. On the track Harbor ran an eye-popping 10.32-second 100-meter dash at the Myrtle Beach (S.C.) Invitational in April, garnering the attention of ESPN's *Get Up*. He bested that time with a 10.22—only 0.03 seconds slower than Tyreek Hill's high school personal best—at the AAU Junior Olympics in August, when he won the 200-meter title (20.96) in the 17-to-18 age group in Greensboro, N.C.

The ESPN segment blew up Harbor's phone during class. That kind of attention wasn't something he wanted as a kid—after the collapse, he didn't want to make a big spectacle of himself—but that's all changed now. He has drawn more than 35 offers from Power 5 schools, narrowing his list down to Michigan, USC, Miami, South Carolina, LSU, Maryland and Georgia.

Harbor describes himself as a "showman" who understands the full scope of his talents. "You got a big crowd?" he asks. "I'm gonna produce." *—Amna Subhan*

FISHING

RECORD RELEASE



OFF THE coast of Hilton Head Island in July, Chip Michalove took out his charter, *The Outcast*, in search of a massive hammerhead that somehow had eluded him the previous afternoon. This time the shark took his bait and ripped 400 yards of fishing line in about a minute. The captain gave chase and, with the help of the two anglers aboard, they reeled in the colossus.

Michalove estimates she weighed just under 1,100 pounds, almost twice the current state mark. Exhausted, he tagged the shark, took a few pictures and set her free—forgoing a potential record, as that would have required the shark to die.

"As you get older, you start to respect your opponent a little more," says Michalove, 46. "You realize that it's not so much your opponent, but your business partner." Business is now booming. As news of the catch-and-release has spread, people are now calling to book *The Outcast* a season in advance.

—Lochlahn March

LEANNE WONG Sport: **Gymnastics** Hometown: **Overland Park, Kans.**

Wong, a sophomore at Florida, won the U.S. Classic all-around title, scoring a 54.40 to edge Shilese Jones by 0.35 points while also taking gold in the balance beam and vault. An alternate on the 2020 U.S. Olympic team, Wong won silver in the all-around at the '21 world championships and was an eight-time All-American for the Gators as a freshman.

JENNA FLYNN Sport: **Water Polo** Hometown: **San Jose**

Flynn, a freshman at Stanford, scored three goals in a 10–8 defeat of Greece to lead the U.S. women's national team to its first youth world championship since 2014. She was the MVP of the '19 Youth Pan American Games with a tournament-high 38 goals in seven matches.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com**.

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COURTESY OF CAPT. CHIP MICHALOVE/OUTCAST SPORT FISHING (MICHALOVE); FLORIDA ATHLETICS (WONG); COURTESY OF JENNA FLYNN (FLYNN)

THEIR

DEC

Sports Illustrated
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ISION

LEBRON JAMES *HAS AN AUDACIOUS DREAM:* **TO PLAY IN THE NBA WITH ONE OF HIS SONS—** *HECK, MAYBE EVEN BOTH OF THEM. AND IF THEY GO ALONG, AND THE BASKETBALL GODS GIVE HIM THAT GIFT? DAMN WHAT ANYBODY THINKS OF IT*

BY
CHRIS BALLARD

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

BRYCE, LEBRON AND BRONNY JAMES
ST. VINCENT–ST. MARY HIGH
AKRON, OHIO, JULY 1

BIOLOGICALLY SPEAKING, A TEENAGER'S BRAIN *IS SOMETHING OF A* TRAIN WRECK.

For starters, it's low in myelin, the coating that allows various regions to communicate with one another. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex is developing at warp speed, so things that a child once took for granted—like the idea that their parents know what they're talking about—suddenly seem ripe for reevaluation. Thus, in addition to acting on seemingly every impulse, a teen is programmed to break away from their parents. This is natural and healthy, but that doesn't make it any easier for a parent—even a wildly successful and wealthy one, like LeBron James.

I mention this because James now has two teenage sons and, as happens for all parents who hit this point, the changes can be startling. "Hell yeah, it's bittersweet to see your kids grow into their own," he said when I brought it up this summer, in his hometown of Akron, Ohio. At the time, James was sitting with his sons Bronny, 17, and Bryce, 15, and we were commiserating about brain chemistry and independence and all the rest. (I have two teenage daughters myself.) James went on to talk about his own experience growing apart from his mom, and how he now tries to focus on what matters most for his kids, "because it's hard as hell to find happiness in this life that we've been brought into."

While it's impossible for any of us to judge someone else's happiness, it would seem that, at 37 and entering his 20th year of pro basketball, James has done as much as anyone to achieve that ideal. He's evolved into a statesman and advocate; become a billionaire; plowed money, time and infrastructure back into his hometown; lifted up childhood friends; brought titles to every team he's played for; defied the ravages of time; and, along with his wife, Savannah, raised three children who seem remarkably normal, all things considered.

Now James is entering the next phase of his career, and his life, just as his oldest son prepares to embark on his own journey as an adult. Traditionally, this is where parent and child part ways, one receding from the spotlight as the other strides into it.

But James has something else in mind. He aims to stick around the NBA long enough to overlap with Bronny, who's currently entering his senior year of high school. If they pull it off, it would make them the first father-son duo to play together in an NBA game, and only the fourth such pairing in the four major U.S. men's sports *(page 36)*.

When James first floated the plan in February, telling *The Athletic* that "my last year will be played with my son" and that "it's not about money at that point," the NBA world set about interpreting. What did this mean for LeBron? For the Lakers? For league balance?

Of course, this scenario rests on a set of assumptions, including that Bronny, a 6' 2" combo guard who's generally ranked in the top 50 of his class, will be good enough to reach the NBA. And, furthermore, that he even *wants* to play basketball for a living, which has been assumed but not yet stated.

Then there are the larger, 10,000-foot questions, like: How do you feel about a father putting such public expectations on his son? And: After all this buildup, what if Bronny *doesn't* make the league? Or: What if he does, but it's largely due to his father's influence? Does that make this a feel-good story—*supportive dad helps son reach his dreams*—or a case of superstar nepotism?

Anyway, lots of people weighed in, from lots of angles, and by the time I caught up with the family in July, at a weekend basketball tournament, Bronny, whose every scrimmage and social media post was already being dissected, had moved even further into the public eye while the rest of us were left to wonder what, if any, grand scheme LeBron had in mind.

THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Bronny doesn't use his given moniker, but his dunking screams LeBron Jr.

DAVID E. KLUTHO

SPALDING
The LeBron James Arena
0
14
7
34
21
BLUES
ST. VINCENT ST. MARY DIV III STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONS 2012
ST. VINCENT ST. MARY DIV II BOYS STATE TRACK & FIELD CHAMPIONS 2013
ST. VINCENT ST. MARY DIV II GIRLS STATE CROSS COUNTRY CHAMPIONS 2013
ST. VINCENT ST. MARY DIV III STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONS 2013
ST. VINCENT ST. MARY DIV II BOYS STATE BASKETBALL CHAMPIONS 2003

TWENTY YEARS AGO, LeBron was the teenager transfixing the nation. After leading St. Vincent–St. Mary High to consecutive state titles he appeared on the cover of this magazine under the tagline THE CHOSEN ONE. The story quotes Danny Ainge saying James would go first in the NBA draft, as a junior.

“I WAS BORN INTO [B
BUT MY DAD IS COOL

That year he met Savannah Brinson, who played softball at a rival high school, and the two stayed together through all that followed: the Cavs years, *The Decision*, the titles in Miami. In 2004, she gave birth to a boy, LeBron James Jr., followed three years later by Bryce Maximus. In ’13, the couple married. One year later, Zhuri Nova arrived.

Throughout it all, LeBron and Savannah retained ties to Akron. They raised the boys nearby, and Bronny—who never really has gone by LeBron Jr.—attended the Old Trail School. Like all parents, they set certain rules. No cellphones until you’re 13. No Instagram till 14. No playing football, for safety reasons. Savannah says they tried to be “very normal in an abnormal situation, if that makes sense.” They also had to be watchful and understand that “it’s a big, wide world out here, and we have to do our job to protect them.”

Bronny first entered the public consciousness in fourth grade, playing with his AAU team. He zipped around the court, heaving up threes and looking a bit like a tiny version of his father. By 11, ESPN reported he had scholarship offers from Kentucky and Duke . . . which rankled LeBron because, *what the hell, the kid’s only 11?*

The rest of it, though, LeBron loved. He coached. He cheered. He joined the boys for layup lines, thundering home dunks as they lofted up underhand runners. When Bronny dropped one of his first in-game dunks, at 14, Dad, mainlining on parental pride, burst onto the court from his baseline seat, flexing. After his team’s alley-oop, James sprinted onto the floor for a celebratory hip bump, doing so with such alacrity that he lost his shoe in the process. At the time, he drew fire from some critics, who labeled him an over-the-top sports dad run amok. (LEBRON JAMES WENT BONKERS, read one headline.) Others, though, saw goofy, paternal joy from a man who has had no relationship with his own father. (LeBron took his mother Gloria’s surname.)

Either way, the attention kept coming. “It was like the Beatles,” says Brook Cupps, whose son, Gabe, joined Bronny on the AAU’s Blue Chips in fifth grade. Gabe was from a tiny farming town, but suddenly his games were on YouTube, where an analyst broke down his prepubescent skill set. “It was something I’d never been exposed to,” he says. “All that pressure to perform.”

Eventually Gabe adjusted and by high school saw it as a positive—“like he’d been swinging a heavy bat the whole time,” as his dad puts it. But Gabe’s experience was inherently different from his backcourt mate’s, for he was on the periphery of the spotlight. And Bronny? The recruiting website on3.com recently declared him “the most famous high school basketball player ever.”

Indeed, when Bronny joined Instagram, in 2019, he amassed a million followers in under 48 hours without really doing anything other than being Bronny. He’s now up to 6.4 million, despite posting only 17 times. If he decides to go to college—we’ll get to that later—his endorsement deals under the new NIL laws will likely break records. Industry estimates peg his value at upward of $6 million a year.

This fall Bronny will play his senior season at the Sierra Canyon School in Los Angeles, where the family moved after LeBron signed with the Lakers in 2018. He will be joined by Bryce, a sophomore, playing on a high school team together for the first time. The weekend I visit, they are all returning to Ohio for The Battle, a youth basketball showcase at St. V’s. Really, though, it’s a James family event. Bronny will play with the Blue Chips in the U-17 division—the tournament format allows him to reunite with his old team—and Bryce with Strive for Greatness, a U-16 squad LeBron sponsors.

For the boys, it’s a chance to hang with teammates, show out on the court and, for Bronny in particular, advance his profile. For LeBron, it’s more complicated.

FROM LEFT: DAVID E. KLUTHO; JEFFERY A. SALTER

The father looks at his two sons. They are wilting. “Hey, we need some air over here.” An assistant blots Bronny’s face, holding a tiny fan that flutters impotently in the face of the sweltering heat.

It’s 3:30 p.m. on the Friday before the tournament, half an hour into a photo shoot in the empty St. V’s gym in downtown Akron. And it’s an anniversary of sorts. Twenty years ago, James first appeared on the cover of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. Today, he has chosen to wear a cutoff T-shirt with a print of that issue.

At the moment, Bronny and Bryce are posing in outfits planned by their stylist. Green shorts match green bleachers, which match green-trimmed shoes. But the sweat is intruding. LeBron grimaces. One of James’s crew—there are, by my count, 11 people on hand, including a PR rep, the head of his foundation and a makeup artist—brings over an industrial-sized black fan. A torrent of air fires forth.

By now, Bronny is practiced at posing, and he cycles through various facial expressions. Bryce, who is gangly and wears glasses, looks more nervous, unsure what to do with his long arms. *Fold them? Hang them by his side?* He shakes them out between poses.

Gloria says that much of her son’s parenting is driven by the absence in his own life—“he’s always been adamant that he’d never be that [kind of] father,” she says—and it shows. Throughout the afternoon, LeBron is attentive. He picks a piece of lint off Bryce’s shirt. He models poses. His children watch, then imitate.

Meanwhile, league dynamics churn on. One day earlier, on June 30, Kevin Durant demanded a trade, then the NBA free-agent window opened and all hell broke loose. Now, dominoes are falling. During the course of the afternoon, the Jazz trade Rudy Gobert to the Timberwolves for a massive haul. Every few minutes more speculation emerges about Durant or Kyrie Irving, who is reportedly hoping to join James in L.A.

ASKETBALL],” *SAYS BRONNY.* “THE PATH WAS ALREADY CHOSEN.
ENOUGH TO LET ME TAKE WHATEVER PATH I WANT.”

Once upon a time, LeBron might have been glued to his phone. But those who know him sense a change—he thinks big picture, looking outside the game. So, at least for the moment, dad stuff comes first. The notes he’s been scribbling on a yellow legal pad throughout the afternoon? They’re not trade scenarios but drills for the Blue Chips practice he’ll run later in the afternoon.

Presently, the three head to the far basket, each with a ball, and fall into an easy rhythm: One shoots; the others mimic. They could be any dad and kids at the Y, only this dad is hitting over-the-backboard bounce shots from out of bounds. Wobbly lefty jumpers give way to underhand spinners and volleyball-set shots and, finally, dunk attempts. Bryce, off one foot, cradles a one-hander. Bronny explodes for a two-handed, one-step jam. Then LeBron, with the alpha-dad move, brings the full force of his 250 pounds crashing down on the rim, hanging for a moment. “All right, we’re

TEENAGE DREAM

Bryce and Bronny get pointers from one of the greatest, at home and occasionally as a coach (left, assisting with the Blue Chips).

good," he proclaims, motioning to the boys. All the while, his personal videographer films, preserving the type of moments he wishes someone had captured from his own childhood.

LeBron's upbringing is well chronicled: He and Gloria going it alone, moving from couch to couch until she landed a $22-a-month apartment. Relative stability followed by intense fame. Gloria says she was not perfect, but she tried. She repeated certain mantras, "like being humble and being positive and appreciating things and not letting circumstances dictate who you are or where you go in life," she says. She also tried to gird him for what might come. "One thing I said a lot was 'Be careful what you wish for.' "

You can never know the situation another parent faces. The swirl of influences and factors. Every case is different. But for most this plays out on a micro scale. Not so James. He and Savannah must parent in front of the world, even more so than most celebrities. Because, really, how many humans are as globally recognizable as LeBron? A dozen? Maybe fewer?

So far, the James family has taken a novel approach, both overtly public and intensely private. LeBron posts Instagram videos of the family: Taco Tuesdays, dad and sons shooting hoops in the driveway, dance parties, birthdays. He tweets out the boys' highlights, with all-caps enthusiasm. In 2019 cameras began following Bronny and his Sierra Canyon teammates for *Top Class*, an Amazon Prime documentary series. Even that choice of schools meant visibility; Sierra Canyon holds an annual media day, appears on ESPN and travels for international exhibition tours. Bronny has already lived much of his life in front of a camera.

At the same time, LeBron curates that exposure. He has ultimate creative control over *Top Class*, which is produced by his media company, Uninterrupted. Same for *The Shop*, his roundtable talk show on YouTube. As Gloria puts it, LeBron and Savannah act as the "buffer" between the kids and fame.

The concept makes sense: If the media and the public are going to fashion an image for your family, rather than watch it play out, why not take control? "That's why I started Uninterrupted," James says. "I got sick and tired of media changing the narrative or picking their own narrative about what I was doing."

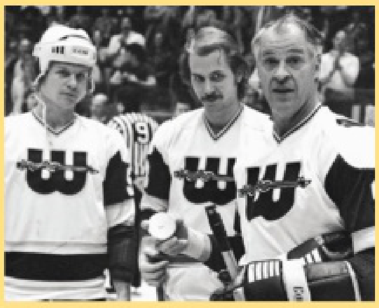
It is, he figures, a head start he can give his kids. "I know [there's] a lot of pressure on them." But Bronny enjoys an ancillary benefit, too—one unavailable to previous generations: the value of the brand he's establishing. He could rake in that NIL money or leverage his name to push into other passions, like video games. (He's already partnered with FaZe Clan, one of the biggest names in esports.) He could even go the route of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, break away and start his own empire.

He's royalty, too, after all.

AFTER THE PHOTO SHOOT we gather at a table in the cafeteria of St. V's to talk. LeBron sits between Bronny and Bryce. It is, I'm told, Bryce's first interview, and one of Bronny's first real sit-downs. The boys are polite and well spoken but reticent. At some questions they scrunch up their faces or purse their lips; one will look to the other brother, or to Dad. Like when I ask about their mom and her role as a parent.

"Ummm . . ." "Hmmm . . ." *Face scrunch*.

ORIGINAL SYNC



MARK / MARTY / GORDIE HOWE
NHL

› Gordie played alongside his sons with the Hartford Whalers, where one night in 1980 the defensive-minded offspring, each in his 20s, started at forward alongside 51-year-old Dad, forming an all-Howe attack line.

LeBron jumps in, laughing. "Y'all afraid of Mommy?!"

Bronny is respectful and looks his questioner in the eye; if he's bucking for teenage independence, he's awfully good at hiding it. He addresses direct questions succinctly. So: Yes, he's sticking with hoops. "I was born into it, so I feel like the path was already chosen," he says. "But my dad is cool enough to let me take whatever path I want if I wanted to not pursue basketball. But I think basketball is going to be my thing, for sure." (Bryce says he thinks it's his thing as well, though with less conviction. "I just tried it, and it turned out I really liked it.")

And yes, Bronny says he hopes to play in the NBA, but he's not counting on it. "I'll see what happens. I'm going to be playing basketball. If [I] go down that path, then it is what it is." If the NBA doesn't pan out, "I'm cool."

FROM LEFT: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES; DOUG PENSINGER/GETTY IMAGES

Bronny is reserved in public, less so around peers. He loves gaming and snowboarding and filming pranks and dance moves. He now dates and has a license. His dad deems him “a good driver,” prompting 7-year-old Zhuri, who is listening in on the conversation from a nearby seat that she keeps scooting closer, to announce, “I’m a good biker!” (Her parents say she hasn’t shown any interest in playing basketball.)

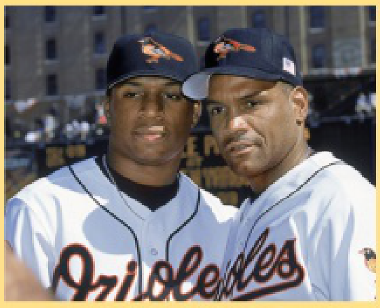
Bronny says he tried to move away from the “Junior” designation early. “I would always get nicknames. Bronny just stuck with me. But I also want to build my own narrative and take my own path and not have the same *LeBron* LeBron path.”

HRONICITY

Only three major father-son pairings predate a potential LeBron-Bronny overlap

KEN GRIFFEY JR. / KEN GRIFFEY
MLB

› The highlight of the Mariners’ 1990 season: Against the Angels on Sept. 14, Ken Jr. (then 20) and his dad (40) homered on consecutive at bats. California’s Dave Winfield joked: “Now it’s keeping up with the *Griffeys*.”



TIM RAINES JR. / TIM RAINES
MLB

› Two days after 22-year-old Tim Jr. made his MLB debut with Baltimore, on Oct. 1, 2001, the O’s acquired his 42-year-old dad from the Montreal Expos. Rock and son played two games next to each other in the outfield.

Throughout our conversation, LeBron listens, prods and occasionally steps in. I get the impression he has two goals. First, to give the boys experience with an outside interview, but with Dad present—sort of like bowling with the bumpers up. Second, like any parent, James is trying to model the process. He knows his kids are watching everything he says and how he says it. In some moments it feels like he’s speaking to them as much as he is to me, reinforcing family ideals.

LeBron and Savannah make a point to do this. During a recent vacation to Turks and Caicos they sat around the table at night, discussing the state of the world and translating it to the boys’ circumstances. LeBron worries about daily challenges—like if his sons are ever pulled over on the road. “You can’t have any expectations just because you’re . . . LeBron’s son,” he says at St. V’s. He looks at Bronny. “You have to be even more cautious, because you just don’t know. And that is a scary thing, being a Black father with a kid that drives. . . . These kids are so well known, and they’re leaving the house, and [our] daughter’s in school.” The only time he feels 100% safe, he says, is when his kids are at home.

So they draw the circle tighter. LeBron uses the metaphor of a support rope for a mountain climber. “We all know we can climb it on our own, but it’s much easier when you do it together. I’m young enough to know a lot of things that they’re going through, but I’m also smart enough to stay out of some of the stuff. It’s not my job to be in their business all the time.

“We all support each other. We want each other to be great. My job is to send it back to him”—he nods at Bronny—“and him to send it to his little brother, little brother to his little sister.”

Viewed this way, perhaps James’s declaration about playing with Bronny is just another carabiner in the support rope—part of a larger, coordinated plan they cooked up.

Actually, no. Turns out that came as a surprise to everyone. Bronny says he hadn’t heard about the idea until his dad said it publicly, though he deems it “pretty cool.” (Neither did Savannah expect it. “No, we hadn’t talked about it,” she says when we speak separately. “I mean, yes, because obviously you ask the boys what they want to be when they’re 10, 11 years old. *I want to be in the NBA*. And I think that’s just something that was near and dear to LeBron's heart.")

James confirms all of this. No, he hadn't discussed it. "We don't even really talk about the future too much. I put it in the air because I like to talk to the basketball gods out there and see if things can come to fruition. I've always set out goals in my career, talked to the basketball gods, and they've listened to all of them. Hopefully they can listen to this last one, too."

Among the many, many milestones of his career, this one would be singular. Plenty of NBA players have fathered NBA sons. Rick Barry produced *three*. In fact, we are currently enjoying a golden age of juniors, the league teeming with Trents and Hardaways and Sabonises. But while a few dads have overlapped with their kids—like when Dell Curry, as a Charlotte analyst, called Steph's and Seth's games; or when Doc Rivers coached his son Austin, with the Clippers—none have played together, for all the reasons you'd expect: longevity and precocity, luck, and the pure math of it. James, though, has a realistic shot.

When I ask about details, he waves away the query. "I like to throw things out in the airwaves, but I'm not one to [say] what's going to happen in the next two to three years. I am a visionary, but I'm also a guy that lives in the moment."

Still, the wheels are already turning. The free-agency deals and trades swirling around us? "I'd definitely be looking at who got first-round picks in 2024, 2025, things of that nature; 2026, '27. I pay attention to that type of stuff."

I do the math—2027?—and nod at Bryce. "Is there a chance you'd stick around for this guy, too?"

LeBron smiles. "I feel like I could play for quite a while. So it's all up to my body, but more importantly, my mind. If my mind can stay sharp and fresh and motivated, then the sky's not even a limit for me. I can go beyond that. But we shall see."

It's a lot to imagine: LeBron at 43, playing in an NBA game with both of his sons. But then, Tom Brady is still rolling at 45. Why can't it happen?

THE FIRST MORNING of the tournament in Akron dawns warm and muggy. Normally, this would be a terrible time to hold such an event: a holiday weekend, in the middle of Ohio, during a heat wave. "Without Bronny, we'd have like five people," says Darren Duncan, the tournament's organizer.

And most of the morning, the stands are half full. By 1:30, however, the energy has shifted. Fans pack the bleachers, and a line of young men with high-tech cameras, hailing from hype sites like *Slam* and Overtime, materialize on the court as if framing a fashion runway, ready to upload footage within minutes. Then out come the Blue Chips, led by Bronny. Wearing his No. 0 jersey around his neck like a cape, he kicks off the layup line with a huge windmill dunk. (He is an exceptional dunker.) And now the DJ is bumping tunes; and kids in Cavs jerseys crane their necks; and at half court LeBron, wearing a Blue Chips T-shirt and a black durag, watches with approval in what is, if you think about it, a surreal scene: standing in the gym he refurbished, in the city he's helping to prop up, down the street from the charter school he founded, in a state inexorably tied to him, while, for the moment, playing the role of a dad-assistant coach.

The other team, a hyperathletic all-star

THE KING RAN SOME

Long before his kids were doing the prep showcase thing, LeBron took St. V's to L.A. and offed Mater Dei Prep on national TV.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

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squad from Canada, gets out early in the first quarter. During timeouts LeBron hovers outside the huddle as Brook Cupps draws on the whiteboard. Cupps—buzz cut, glasses, steady—has done the bulk of the coaching over the years, with James dropping in when his schedule allows, providing pointers and doling out Skittles. For now, LeBron is the guy offering water and towels, asking how many timeouts are left and delivering high-fives. *This* LeBron is weirdly relatable, even if he's still 6' 9", with roughly 5% body fat. (It's strangely comforting that James sports a black lumbar support around his middle, a concession to age and the crappy ergonomics of folding chairs.)

James is vocal, if nothing like the early days. He encourages Bronny, always, to "Rebound and push!" He applauds defensive rotations and tells Gabe and Bronny to "Back up! Make them hit a jump shot!" He hollers, "Pass! One more! One more!" during a hockey assist.

Earlier in the morning, Bryce played his first game. At 15, he is long and stringy, and he wears goggles. Most everyone I meet in LeBron's orbit comments on how much Bryce has sprouted up over the last year or so, something the internet has also noticed. He now stands even with his older brother.

During Bryce's game, LeBron was a spectator, seated in a chair by the end line, doing his best, as all parents must, to stay in his lane. When he watches his boys play, he says, "I try to relax, but I can't." So he crossed and uncrossed his arms. Stroked his beard. Occasionally hollered about a call. On the court, Bryce hit a three and endeavored to keep pace with bigger, stronger opponents. He got frustrated at times and excited at others—basically, what you'd expect at 15. Savannah, who was All-City as a pitcher, says Bryce is more like her—"he'll clap back if you talk to him"—while Bronny is more a reflection of his dad: "calm, cool and collected."

Indeed, over the course of the weekend Bronny rarely shows emotion other than a sly smile. Smooth and graceful, he finds the open man and explodes for vertical rebounds. He misses his first three three-pointers against the Canadian team but then heats up in the second half. He finishes a backdoor alley-oop with a two-handed dunk, then chases down an opposing guard, soaring up and spiking an attempted layup, a play unnerving in its similarity to one of his father's iconic chase-down blocks. Across four games in the tourney he averages 12 points and four assists.

All of this is great, but what most people want to know is: *So, how good is he going to be?* That's hard to answer, at least right now. Over the years, Bronny has consistently ranked as a four-star recruit (out of five). His high school stats are not overwhelming, but Sierra Canyon is a powerhouse; two of Bronny's freshman-year teammates, Brandon Boston Jr. and Ziaire Williams, are already in the NBA. This will be the first season the team is his to lead.

Watching him over the weekend, what sticks out is not his athleticism (though his leaping ability is elite) or his shooting (nice release; runs hot and cold) or any traditional skill set, but rather the feeling you get when watching him: *This is someone I'd want to play with*.

Showcase events such as The Battle are just that: showcases. Guards tend to be ball-dominant, handling and attacking and shooting. Everyone looks to get theirs. Not Bronny, though. He grabs defensive rebounds, takes one dribble and then passes ahead to open wing shooters. He flies down the court in transition and pitches out for corner threes. None of this is surprising, given his lineage, but it's still heartening to watch. Here's a kid with the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he's making the right basketball play, resisting the urge to rack up numbers.

Gabe calls Bronny "super fun to play with." It's a theme I hear echoed throughout the weekend, from youth scouts and players and coaches, like Joey Gruden of Dayton Elite. "I like his game," Gruden says after the Blue Chips dismantle his team. "Credit for not trying to do too much despite the spotlight."

DAVID E. KLUTHO (2)

Of course, there's a flip side to this, says talent evaluator Justin Brantley, a former national scouting director at NCSA Athletic Recruiting. "I see it as a gift and a curse," says Brantley, who's watched Bronny since sixth grade and is providing play-by-play for the Battle games. "He wouldn't try to take over games. He always tried to play the right way, and sometimes in grassroots basketball you need someone who's going to take over and take the next six shots. You'll see him make the right read, even when you're like, *I wish he would have attacked.*"

For the record, Brantley thinks Bronny can succeed at the highest level—"he is so fundamentally sound, and you can imagine how good he'll be around guys who understand spacing and basketball"—but not everyone is so sure. One successful AAU director I speak to, who asks not to be named, for fear of getting on LeBron's bad side, worries about Bronny's size, based on the common assumption that, at 17, he is done growing. "I think he's a good player, but I was at the NBA combine last year and maybe two or three guys were under 6' 3", and they had 45-inch verticals and Olympic speed. At [his] size, to get to the NBA is going to be very, very difficult."

DIFFERENT FOLKS

Bryce, like his siblings, knows the rare pressures of being raised by parents as well known as LeBron and Savannah (above, in Akron).

He pauses. "But LeBron is a very powerful person. Who knows what he can pull off?"

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, during his induction into the basketball Hall of Fame, Michael Jordan stood at a podium and addressed his daughter Jasmine and his two sons, Jeffrey and Marcus. Jordan assured them that a support system stood ready, and that they were equipped to make good decisions. He said something else, too: "I wouldn't want to be you guys . . . because of all the expectations you have to deal with."

Some famous sports parents address this burden by dissuading their kids from following in their footsteps; others try to manage each step of the way. And, really, who are any of us to say what is the right strategy? Parenting a teenager is hard enough without the world watching. There is no playbook. My daughters are 15 and 13, multisport athletes, and they are wonderful and terrifying at the same time. Most days, I'm just doing the best I can. I've coached their teams and supported their endeavors and cut off their screen time and made mistakes and tried to learn from those mistakes but then made the same mistakes again.

With LeBron, we know his parental dream—and, to be honest, as a dad, I think it sounds pretty awesome. But it also comes with particularly outsized expectations. How can Bronny meet a standard that is, by its nature, singular? To surpass his father he'd literally need to be the best ever. "It's unfortunate," says Savannah. But she also knows it's unavoidable, so she reminds her son: *You don't have to do what your dad did. You don't need the same accolades.* "And who's to say that he won't [reach those heights]?" she asks. "But don't blanket me with my dad's achievements and think that automatically I'm supposed to do the same thing, or even surpass it. Let me do me."

LeBron agrees. He stresses that he never told his boys to play. "I've always let them just see if they had a love for [basketball]. Because, at the end of the day, nothing is going to come to fruition if you're just doing it because you feel like it's what your parents are doing. Nah, it's going to fizzle out too fast."

He points out that he's had no mentors in this realm. He doesn't call up other NBA dads or talk shop with Dell Curry. "Nobody," he says. "My whole career has been built off trial and error. I ain't have nobody when I came in at 18 [who] had an open-door policy for me, to help guide me through what I was about to go into. So it's been trial and error . . . just being a sponge."

And what of those who say his comments about playing with Bronny place unfair expectations on his son? LeBron leans forward, animated. "I don't give a s--- what nobody says. Our quest and our journey is not predicated on what everybody said. You going to have five people that love you out of 10. Then you have five people that hate you out of 10. That's just the way of the land. No matter what you do." He's fired up now. "You can be a guy who literally goes to work at Starbucks, and there's going to be four or five customers that come in and hate the way that you made that chai tea latte. It's just how it works. And the faster you can realize that happens, the better off you'll be, because you're not going to respond or give that too much energy." ("Don't give it no energy" is a motto he mentions repeatedly.)

Instead, James tries to see each slight as an opportunity, to "let that give you drive and motivation." He picks up his phone. "I like to write down quotes." He scrolls through and finds one, from Arnold Schwarzenegger: "Everybody pities the weak. Jealousy, you have to earn."

For her part, Savannah is adamant about keeping perspective. "Of course Dad is wanting [Bronny] to play on the same court eventually, maybe on the same team. That would be the icing on the cake for his career, and probably [as] a father," she says. "But for me, I just want [Bronny] to be happy. If you are happy playing in gaming competitions in Long Beach, then that's what I want you to do. If you're happy being a franchise player for an NBA team, that's what I want you to do.... A lot of people are doing things and moving through life and aren't necessarily happy."

This is the sense you get from the Jameses: They understand the weight placed on their children—that burden Jordan spoke of—and they are trying to meet it head on. "[My kids] hear the narrative out there on them," LeBron tells me. "Even though they don't talk about it, they hear the narrative; they see where they are."

He pauses. "And the best thing about it? They have a prove-you-wrong mentality, like their father."

THE AUDIENCE THEY ultimately need to convince resides in NBA front offices, and in the weeks that follow I talk to various execs about LeBron's intention to play with Bronny. "I'm sure, when that day comes"—when Bronny becomes draft-eligible—"you have to think about it: Can we get LeBron for the midlevel exception?" says one front-office exec. (LeBron's recent extension with the Lakers means he'll control his own destiny in 2024–25.) "But do you draft Bronny first, even if he's not good, because you might get LeBron on the cheap? That's kind of wild." He pauses. "I don't think he's a first-rounder, but I don't think he's *nothing*."

Overall, the consensus is that it's too early. "People around the league aren't spending any time thinking about this right now," says one Western Conference general manager. "There's so much drama every day. Things move so fast."

Then there's the difficulty of trying to project two years ahead. Will there be a new collective bargaining agreement? Will the league add a third round to the draft? And where will LeBron and Bronny be as players? NBA teams are good at projecting upward trajectories and downward trajectories—but this? This requires plotting both Bronny's rise and LeBron's decline on the same graph, and that's particularly challenging. "You're talking about arguably the greatest player ever, so no forecasting model exists," says the GM. "[LeBron] has defied everything. For most players, you might predict a 10% decline per year at that age, but I'm not sure you can say that for him. The 40-year-old version of him might be incredible."

And also motivated. Think about it: So much of what sustains elite athletes at LeBron's age is mental. Every season takes its toll—the grueling preparation

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and recovery and the constant drama of the NBA. James is on track to pass Kareem Abdul-Jabbar early in 2023 as the all-time leading scorer. He's already a billionaire. He can chase Jordan's six titles, but much of that is out of his control. Playing with his son, though? Now *that* is a flag he can run to, a reason to stick around even if the Lakers are out of the hunt or his body is balky. It feels real. Shared. Like, *I gotta be there for my kid. I can't let him down*. (Also: James told me he draws inspiration from Brady. "He took a chunk of me when he retired, and then when he came back I was like, 'I needed that for sure.' ")

First, though, a decision about college looms. Bronny could essentially choose his school. Or go overseas for a year, play against grown men and toughen up. Same in the G League route. Or he could just train—and with his father's resources, that means training with the best of the best.

When I sit with them, the family is undecided. LeBron talks through the options, giving each equal weight, and says they'll decide in a family sit-down. Savannah tells me Bronny "wants to have a collegiate career," and I get the sense that she would like that as well. "I think it would be really cool for him to start with collegiate basketball, just to start his legacy there," he says.

It is, after all, one thing Bronny could accomplish that his father never did.

AS THE REST of the country settles into Fourth of July barbecues, Bronny cruises in his last game, on the third day of the tournament, scoring 14 points with five assists, a block and a steal. Two weeks later, he'll turn heads at the Nike Peach Jam tournament and the buzz will grow, bleeding out from the online publications that cover youth sports into larger media outlets. ESPN will speculate that Bronny is going to Duke and move him up to No. 24 in his class. Another set of talking heads will claim the opposite: After this performance, he's skipping college for sure.

Meanwhile, the highlight factories post compilations with captions like, "OH MY GOODNESS BRONNY," and soon enough Bronny produces his 17th Instagram post and his dad is sharing it and then dropping footage of the three boys working out together, one dunking after the other, writing, "We working! That's all we know. We don't want s--- giving [*sic*] to us, we EARN it! #JamesGang," and this sends a jolt of excitement through the interwebs.

Soon enough, in early August, after LeBron tells me, "The greatest thing I can see right now is my two boys on the same team," Bryce and Bronny share the floor for the first time in an AAU game and LeBron is overwhelmed, tweeting, "This is INSANE!! I'm EMOTIONAL AF!!WOW." And the future is getting a bit clearer: When I check in with LeBron in late August he says that Bronny now "wants to go the college route."

DID JAMES PLACE UNFAIR EXPECTATIONS ON HIS SON?
LEBRON: "I DON'T GIVE A S--- WHAT NOBODY SAYS."

The Finals
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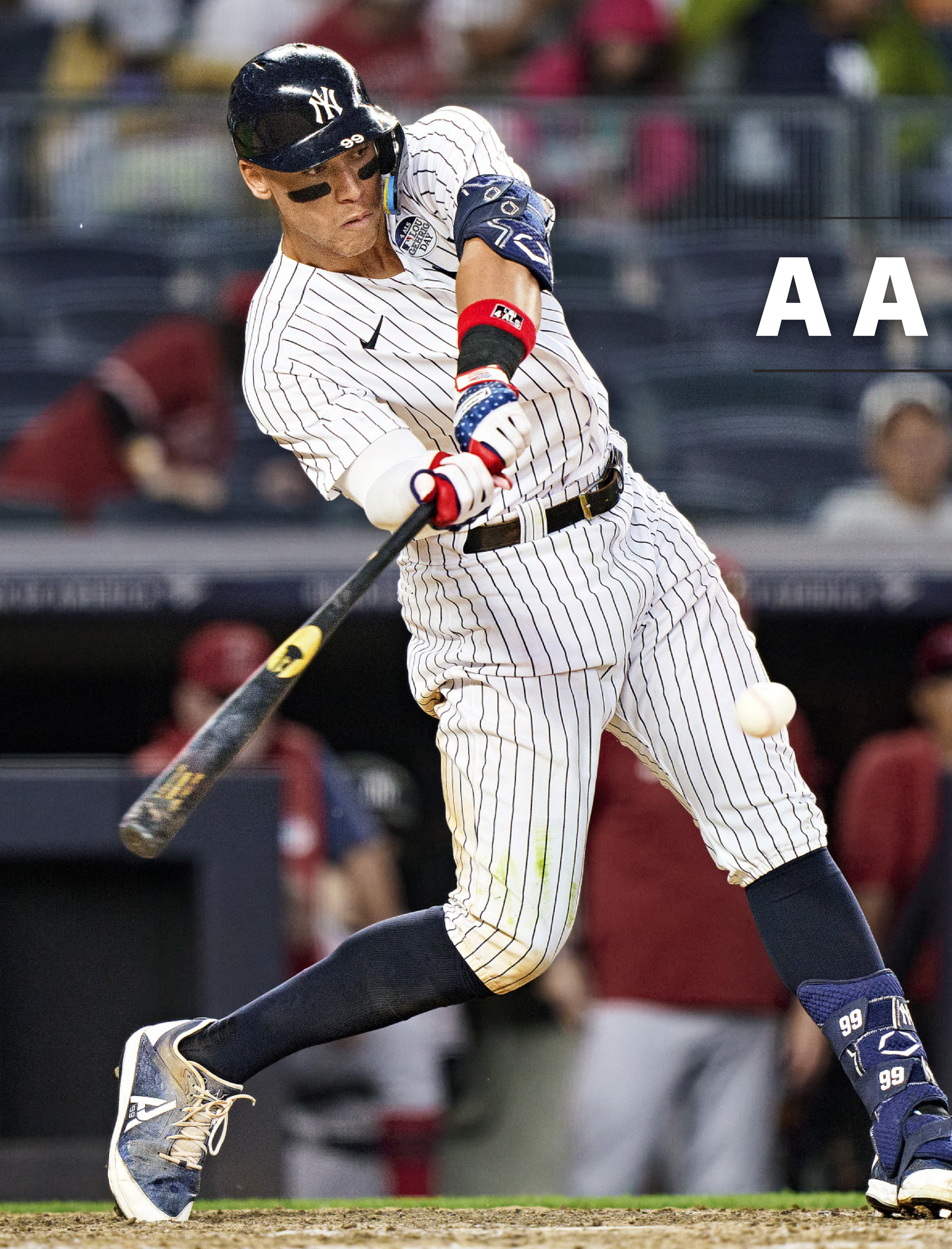
NBA CHAMPS

HOUSE OF THE RISING SONS

By the time James won a title with the Cavs, in 2016, ESPN had already reported that Duke had offered Bronny (left, with Zhuri and Bryce) a scholarship.

By this point, the train is gaining steam, and it feels like there's no turning back, and, watching it play out, I think back to a moment on the Saturday night of the tournament, after the games had finished. All the fans had gone home. Finally the players could drop their poses and relax. Bryce's team headed out for pizza, goofing off as they waited for a table. Other squads returned to the Courtyard Marriott downtown, where they commandeered the pool and ran through the hallways and had ice fights until 2 a.m., sprinting up and down the hallways, as teenagers do, reveling in that twilight moment between childhood and manhood when anything seems possible and you can still leave much of the worrying and the planning to the adults and their myelin-rich brains, trusting that, in the end, they know what they're doing.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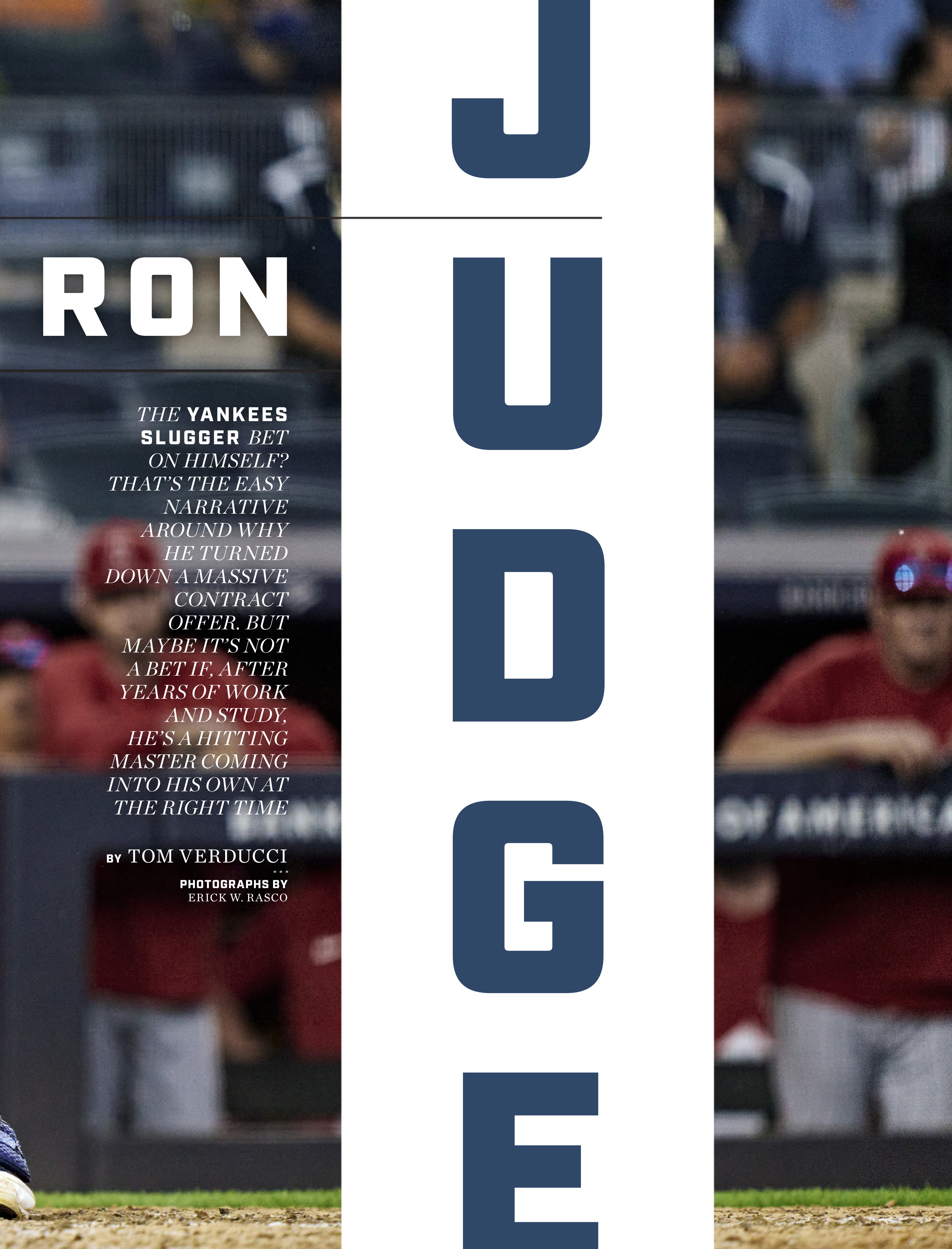

RON JUDGE

THE **YANKEES SLUGGER** *BET ON HIMSELF? THAT'S THE EASY NARRATIVE AROUND WHY HE TURNED DOWN A MASSIVE CONTRACT OFFER. BUT MAYBE IT'S NOT A BET IF, AFTER YEARS OF WORK AND STUDY, HE'S A HITTING MASTER COMING INTO HIS OWN AT THE RIGHT TIME*

BY TOM VERDUCCI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ERICK W. RASCO

THE SPLIT-FINGERED FASTBALL FAIRLY WINKED AT AARON JUDGE AS IT PASSED HIS FIELD OF VISION. JUDGE DID NOT FALL FOR ITS FALSE CHARM. HE WATCHED THIS CHANGEUP DISGUISED AS A FASTBALL FROM RED SOX PITCHER NATHAN EOVALDI TUMBLE EVER SO SLIGHTLY BELOW THE OUTSIDE CORNER OF HOME PLATE. BALL ONE.

That Aug. 12 pitch might have been just another one of the 12,593 pitches Judge had seen to that point in his career with the Yankees, including 104 from Eovaldi, except for what happened next. What no one saw ranked at least as amazing as the unmistakable percussive punishment Judge delivered to the next pitch. It was the advanced calculus known by only an elite hitter—part homework, part intuition, part pattern recognition from those 12,000 pitches. It is the reason Judge is chasing home run history.

"Eovaldi—and even the Red Sox in general—they like to throw me up and in with the heater," Judge says. "They [first] like to stay with stuff soft away. Soft away, down and away, down and away . . . see if they can steal an early strike. And then they always like to come back in and get me a little off balance and make me be conscious of it so they can go back to that away pitch.

"So when they went with a splitter down and away for a ball, I just had a feeling. *O.K., I don't think they want to go down there again to go 2–0 on me. They might try to come up and in here and . . .*

"It kind of worked out."

Judge smiles at his own litotes. Eovaldi threw an up-and-in fastball directly where catcher Kevin Plawecki set the target—and precisely where Judge expected the pitch. He hit it 113.8 miles per hour, harder than any ball hit all season by any right-handed hitter on an up-and-in fastball. It soared completely out of Fenway Park, landing atop a parking garage across the street. Eovaldi remained in a state of amazement after the game, telling reporters, "It's just, he's on fire right now. He's locked in at the plate. I felt like I located that pitch."

The blast gave Judge 46 home runs through 113 team games, a pace matched by only Barry Bonds in 2001 (48, on his way to a record 73) and Babe Ruth (46 in 1921, on his way to 59 in a 154-game season). No player has hit 60 home runs since MLB began testing for steroids in 2003. And no American League player has come within three of the league record of 61 since Roger Maris set it in 1961.

"Seventy-three is the record," Judge says. "In my book. No matter what people want to say about that era of baseball, for me, they went out there and hit 73 homers and 70 homers, and that to me is what the record is. The AL record is 61, so that is one I can kind of try to go after. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, it's been a fun year so far."

Where Judge's bat met Eovaldi's fastball is the preeminent metaphor for this Year of Judge. It is a moment in time and space where a hitter executes his craft in a way that is, as the writer Dan Jenkins defined it in golfing terms, *dead solid perfect*. The intersection of a round bat traveling 85 miles per hour and round ball traveling 93 miles per hour occurs about 12 to 18 inches in front of home plate in an impact area of about 12 square centimeters—opposing forces

TALL TASKS

At 6' 7", Aaron Judge is larger than life—partly because he plays smaller than he should. By mid-August he already had 13 stolen bases, four more than anyone his height previously had in a season. And he's excelling at a position that historically has been dominated by smaller players. Judge is on track this year to do something only two other (much shorter) players have ever done: hit 50 homers, lead the majors in slugging and play at least 50 games in center field.

AARON JUDGE

Height: 6' 7"

2022 *(through Aug. 21): 46 HR, .652 SLG, 57 games in CF*

MICKEY MANTLE

Height: 5' 11"

1956: *52 HR, .705 SLG, 144 games in CF*

1961: *54 HR, .687 SLG, 150 games in CF*

WILLIE MAYS

Height: 5' 10"

1955: *51 HR, .659 SLG, 152 games in CF*

1965: *52 HR, .645 SLG, 147 games in CF*

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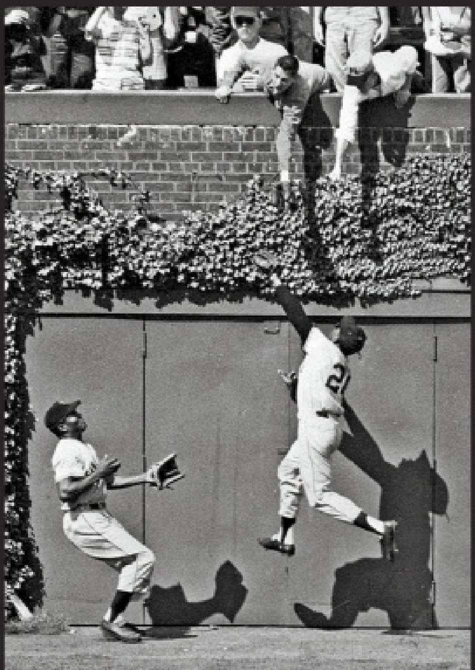


BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

colliding in a window the size of three postage stamps. No one creates this perfect convergence, known as "barrels" when done at optimum force and angle, more than Judge.

This season is defined by the intersection of forces in Judge's career. Of the wisdom gleaned from those 12,000 pitches. Of the Yankees' offering him a contract extension of $213.5 million just before Opening Day and then, to his disappointment, going public with the terms of it after he turned it down. Of his impending free agency. Of the advice he received from a former teammate about how to protect what had been his injury-prone body. Of accomplishing by July 28 the one goal this year that makes him proudest—and has nothing to do with hitting home runs.

The simplistic narrative is that Judge "bet on himself" by turning down $213.5 million. He does not see it that way. "It was never a gamble for me, because no matter whether we got a deal done or didn't get a deal done I was still going to be playing with the Yankees this year," he says. "In my mind there was no gamble. I'll be playing for the Yankees, working as hard as I can to help us win a World Series. All that other stuff, that's why I've got an agent."

AS DID MARCUS AURELIUS, Mark Twain and Joan Didion, Aaron Judge keeps a notebook. It used to be a physical notebook, but when he found carrying it around to be a bit of a pain, he switched to keeping a digital version on his phone. He will log key swing thoughts from his personal hitting coach and how he felt at the plate during especially good games.

Each time he opens his digital notebook, the first page greets him with a reminder: ".179." That was Judge's batting average in 2016, when he struck out in 44% of his trips to the plate during a late-season call-up. After overhauling his swing that winter, Judge hit a rookie-record 52 home runs the next season. After that he took a black marker and wrote ".179" in his size-17 spikes to remind himself of the struggle. He has since moved the numerical reminder from his shoes to the title page of his notebook. "Still glaring at me right at the top is '.179,' " he says. "No matter how many homers, what's going on, or we're in first place, I know it can change in the blink of an eye."

Hitting, it turns out, is a bit like how Didion described writing: "an attempt to find out what matters, to find the pattern in disorder, to find the grammar in the shimmer."

Despite those 52 homers in 2017, Judge struggled in other ways to find the pattern in the disorder that pitchers presented him. That season he struck out 50 times flailing at breaking pitches out of the zone—fourth-most in the majors. He hit .224 on breaking pitches over his first five seasons. He watched too many hittable pitches go by early in counts.

Moreover, injuries wracked his 6' 7", 282-pound body. He missed 37% of the Yankees' games from 2018 through '20. He suffered a broken wrist in '18. An oblique strain in '19. A cracked rib and collapsed lung in '20. It was after Judge returned in '19 from the oblique strain that veteran teammate Edwin Encarnación pulled him aside after a game. Encarnación noticed how often Judge would hit in the indoor batting cage, even during games.

"If I struck out, I'd be in the cage," Judge says. "Hitting, hitting, hitting. If my swing didn't feel right, I'd be back in the cage. In-game hitting, pregame hitting, postgame hitting."

Encarnación told him, "All those swings you're taking? It's making you tired and it's going to get you hurt. And all you are doing is practicing bad swings. You don't need to take a thousand swings. You just need to take a couple and go out and play. Less is more."

"When he told me that," Judge says, "I was like, *Less is more? What's he talking about?* Once I started learning that I was like, *O.K., that's probably why I'm blowing out certain muscles.*

"I started watching veteran guys. I watched DJ LeMahieu. He'll go in and take five swings off the tee, five flips, and go out there in the game and go 3-for-4. And that was a lesson for me. It's quality over quantity. It's helped me out the past two years especially."

Entering September, Judge had played in more than 90% of the Yankees' games over the past two years. He prepares for games now by taking "a couple" of swings off the tee; a few more off flips; a few more off "short BP," in which the pitcher stands only about 40 feet away; and a few more against a high-velocity machine that spits out fastballs at 110 miles per hour as well as nasty, high-spin sliders. Judge also will simply track the pitches without swinging so that his eyes grow accustomed to more velocity than he will see later.

"So when I step out there in a game it's *Oh, that's all this guy has?*" Judge says. "*I saw that a hundred times already.*"

He also has incorporated postgame maintenance work for his body, including stretching exercises, hot and cold tub therapy sessions, and saunas.

"I do all my recovery stuff, which you don't think about when you're 24 or 25," he says. "You just think, *I played my game. I'm going to eat, go back to bed and I'll wake up feeling great.* Now it's the little things, even if it's 20 minutes after the game of stretching."

Judge hit a career-high .287 last season. He cut his strikeout rate to a career low (25%). He finished fourth in MVP voting. He wanted more. Soon after the season ended, he reported to the Yankees' training complex in Tampa and worked with one of the team's speed trainers.

"I said, 'Hey, I see guys in the minor leagues with 40 stolen bases and I know I'm faster than that guy. What can I learn from you?' " Judge says.

They broke down his running form and studied how to get a better first step. If there is a definitive story about what motivates Judge, this is it. Almost

SPRAY HITTER

He may literally stand above them all, but Judge's teammates say his even-keeled leadership is key to the Yankees' hopes of celebrating a World Series.

AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES

immediately after hitting 39 homers and slugging .544, the biggest position player in baseball history went to the minor league camp to become a better base runner.

"Especially hitting higher in the lineup," says Judge, who usually bats second, "if I can get on base and I can get into scoring position or even have that threat to the pitcher that I might steal, [the guys] behind me might get better pitches to hit."

Judge has a chance to lead the majors in runs, home runs, RBIs and total bases, which has been done by only Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ted Williams and Mickey Mantle since RBIs became official in 1920. But ask him which part of his season brings him the most pride, and Judge—who had swiped 13 bases in 14 tries by the middle of August, three times as many as any other player 6' 7" or taller in history—has a simple answer:

"Stolen bases."

THE YANKEES OFFERED Judge $30.5 million a year. Eleven players earn more, including two on his own team. (The Yankees will be paying Gerrit Cole and Giancarlo Stanton more over the next six years.) They made the proposal just before Judge's deadline to get a deal done by Opening Day. Immediately after Judge's rejection, New York GM Brian Cashman announced the terms of the offer in a press conference for the sake of transparency. Judge did not appreciate such candor.

"I could have taken it out on the organization and taken it out on the fan base and taken it out on my teammates," Judge says. "But I kind of turned it into a positive. Like, 'Hey, we didn't get it done. Now I can turn my focus back to the season and do what I can do to help this team win as many games as we can.' That's what I decided to do."

"Nothing fazes him," says Yankees first baseman Anthony Rizzo. "You don't know if he's 4-for-4 with four homers or 0-for-4 with four strikeouts. That's amazing, because he carries the whole weight of being the face of the franchise. I think just how he's handled himself this year, with all the quote-unquote noise, turning down the money, that being made public what he turned down and just going out and producing every day is amazing."

Cole, when asked to identify Judge's best trait, says, "The even keel. I wish you could see him some days when he's DHing. He's so loose. We're hanging out on the couch watching the game on TV and talking about the game, and when it's his turn for another at bat he gets up off the couch and goes out and hits another home run."

THIS IS THE intersection. All roads led here. The .179. The $231.5 million. The 12,000 pitches.

"A lot of the work he's done up to this point, not just this year, it's showing itself," Yankees hitting coach Dillon Lawson says. "His ability to handle more types of pitches is most impressive. It's having the information and now being able to use it because he's more skilled. Maybe the most impressive thing is he's found a way to improve without going outside of his strengths. Guys with power typically have to lose some power to gain more contact. He's kept it."

CONTRACT I WAS

AGING WELL

Judge's free-agent case will be bolstered by his improved baserunning and strong glove.

with little protest. “He told me hasn’t been thrown out of a game here or in the minor leagues,” Lawson says. “His temperament plays into his consistency.”

Having such a big strike zone can be a vulnerability, but, says teammate Josh Donaldson, “He controls the strike zone really well. I remember I talked to Nelson Cruz in Minnesota, another guy with long arms. They have to focus on staying tight with their movements. If their arms get away from their body at all they get jammed. Judge understands really well the effort level he needs to produce a quality swing.”

“I know this: Preparing to face Judge is a lot different now,” says Kyle Snyder, the Rays’ pitching coach. “It’s harder. He covers so many more pitches.” Through 13 meetings this year, covering 213 pitches, the Rays threw Judge only 23% fastballs, including only eight high fastballs in the zone.

“I love the little chess match that some people don’t see from the outside between the batter and pitcher,” Judge says. “Why certain pitches are thrown. Why guys swing at certain pitches. The different situations in a game that come up always intrigued me as a kid.

“Now, it’s a lot of late nights of video, watching past at bats, watching guys similar to me and how they pitched against them in recent outings. It’s also not being afraid to take the chance and knowing I’ve done my homework. Now it’s just go out there, recognize the pitch and do damage.”

> ***“IT WAS NEVER A GAMBLE FOR ME,” SAYS JUDGE OF HIS STRATEGY.*** “Whether we got a deal done or didn’t… ***STILL GOING TO BE PLAYING FOR THE YANKEES THIS YEAR.”***

By mid-August, Judge was leading the majors in slugging against both fastballs and breaking pitches. He hit 15 of his first 46 homers off breaking pitches; his previous high was eight. After 117 games he had more hits off the first or second pitch of an at bat (45) than in any season of his career, a testament to his preparation and intuition.

This historic season is happening at a time when it has never been more difficult to hit since the mound was lowered in 1969. (The overall MLB batting average through three-quarters of the season was .243, which would be the fourth-lowest since 1900.) Four-seam fastballs were averaging 93.9 miles per hour, an all-time high and fully two miles an hour faster than just 14 years ago. The number of pitches clocked at 100 mph and faster more than tripled from only three years ago. Sliders were spinning 316 RPMs faster than they were seven years ago.

If all that did not make for a difficult enough hitting environment, Judge’s height creates problems for umpires calling low pitches against him. From the start of 2017 through mid-August, Judge had 309 pitches below the zone miscalled as strikes—22% more than any other hitter. Judge bears such treatment

Judge had never faced Royals right-handed reliever Jackson Kowar before he stepped in with the bases loaded July 29. Kowar throws his changeup to right-handed batters more often on first pitches (48%) than he does later in the at bat (38%). Kowar threw a changeup first pitch. Judge was ready for it. He smashed it for a grand slam.

“He is great at how to apply his mechanics based on what the pitcher is doing,” Lawson says. “*How do I apply it against a stock pitcher? A guy with ride? A guy with sink? A slider monster?* He has shown me he has a skill set and truly refined it. It looks really simple. But if you’re not at the point he is in his career you can’t do this stuff.

"It's like what people say about overnight success. You don't know the years of work that went into it. This has been years of work in the making."

This is what happens when a hitter discovers the pattern in disorder, the grammar in the shimmer. The exquisitely crafted sentence and the swing against the 0–1 Eovaldi fastball are so perfect as to belie the toil that made such beauty possible. What is genius if not the camouflage of effort?

"The gamesmanship," Cole says, "is where he continues to get better. He takes pitches out of a pitcher's pocket. He did it to Scherzer. Max fired 97 up and in. Dotted it up. And he spoiled it. The fact that Max hadn't thrown 97 all game and the fact that Aaron hadn't seen a fastball in like an hour and 45 minutes made it amazing."

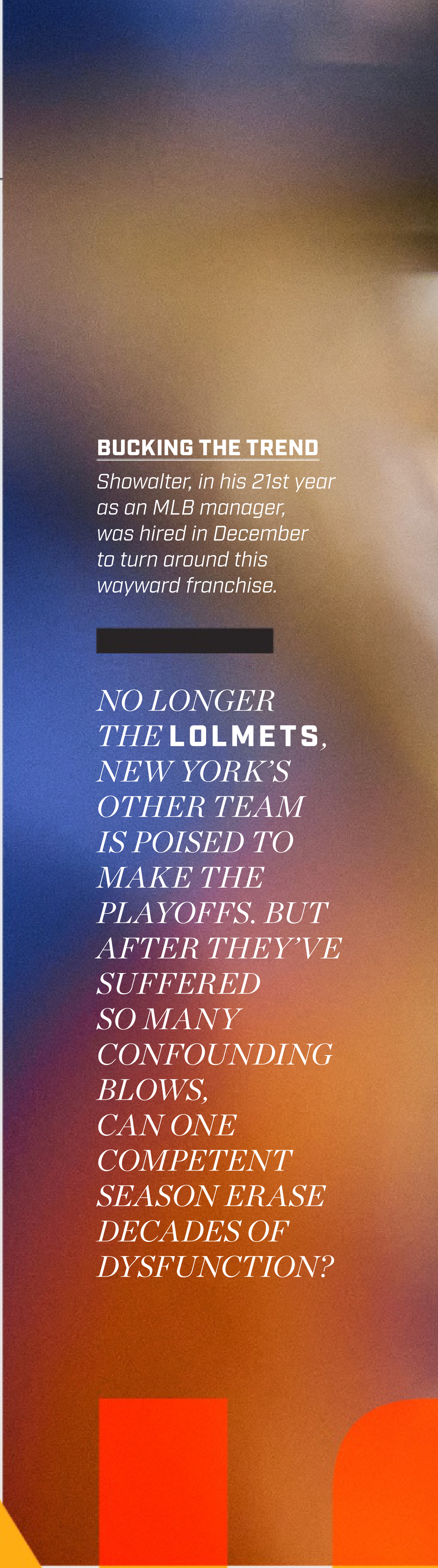
Ask Judge how he wants this season to end, and he will talk about not his final tally of home runs, but whether the Yankees will win the World Series. "I want to be a World Series champion," he says. "Not only once, but twice, three times if I can—as many times as I get a chance."

There is something else he wants. This wish of his is apparent on the television monitors that hang from the ceiling of the Yankees' clubhouse. They are in full view from Judge's locker. On an August afternoon he can see the faces of Little Leaguers, which are the faces of hope, looking for someone or something to follow. He is moved to hear how many of them regard Aaron Judge as their favorite player, and how many of them wear his number.

"It really hit me the type of impact I've had when I started seeing Little Leaguers wearing 99," he says. "I didn't see too many 99s when I was growing up. I saw a lot of number 2s, but not too many 99s.

"Seeing that, and seeing this little kid in Kentucky, or in New York, in Florida, in California . . . they're watching every single thing you do. Every little thing you say. It puts it in perspective. Do the right things, play the game the right way and hopefully you inspire one of those kids to do the right thing in 10, 15 years when they're in your spot."

This is his season in the shimmer. How it ends is yet to be written—the number of home runs he hits, whether the Yankees win the last game of the year, the final number and payer of his next contract. But what he already has achieved is an equilibrium in his career, a soundness of body and mind that is behind a historic season. In this way, too, he resembles Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic known as the last of the Five Good Emperors of Rome, who one day pulled out his notebook and wrote, "Give your heart to the trade you have learnt, and draw refreshment from it." ☐



BUCKING THE TREND

Showalter, in his 21st year as an MLB manager, was hired in December to turn around this wayward franchise.

NO LONGER THE **LOLMETS***, NEW YORK'S OTHER TEAM IS POISED TO MAKE THE PLAYOFFS. BUT AFTER THEY'VE SUFFERED SO MANY CONFOUNDING BLOWS, CAN ONE COMPETENT SEASON ERASE DECADES OF DYSFUNCTION?*

Who’s Laughing OW?

BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ERICK W. RASCO

ONE OF HEPTADECABILLIONAIRE Steve Cohen's first acts as owner of the Mets was to give almost everyone a raise. This was not actually his idea. Team president Sandy Alderson had spent nearly eight years as the club's GM before stepping back to deal with a recurrence of an unspecified form of cancer, and when Cohen brought him back in 2020 and promoted him, one of the first items on Alderson's to-do list was a dollar sign.

Alderson had initially joined the Mets in 2010 as a suggestion by the commissioner's office to lend stability to a franchise reeling from the collapse of Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme; the trustee for the victims sued then owner and major Madoff investor Fred Wilpon for $1 billion, saying that he knew or should have known the returns were fraudulent. (Wilpon denied the allegations; in '12, he settled for $162 million.) Wilpon had to take out $65 million in loans, including $25 million from MLB, just to make payroll.

He began cutting costs anywhere he could, slashing player salary by more than $50 million in 2012, the deepest gash in major league history. Amid the chaos, Alderson lost employees to higher-paying teams. He will never know how many promising candidates turned him down because the Mets lowballed them.

Now he was back, tasked again with stabilizing the same wayward organization. In November 2020, Wilpon sold the team for $2.4 billion to Cohen, a hedge fund manager whose business practices made some of his fellow owners nervous: His first firm, SAC Capital Advisors, pleaded guilty in '13 to criminal and civil charges of insider trading and paid a record $1.8 billion settlement. (Cohen was never personally charged with a crime, but as part of a U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission settlement in which he did not admit wrongdoing, he was barred from managing other people's money for two years. When that period expired, the SEC approved him to resume operations. Some of the employees who were charged with crimes had their convictions overturned.) Cohen, a Mets minority owner since '12, saw Alderson as a respected figure who would help legitimize his bid for majority control.

Fewer than 100 people in the world have accumulated more wealth than Cohen; *Forbes* estimates his net worth at $17.4 billion, some three times more than the next-richest MLB team owners. His peers were concerned enough about his disproportionate might to add an additional luxury-tax threshold—the so-called Cohen Tax—to last winter's collective bargaining agreement. ("It's better than having a bridge named after you," the owner likes to joke.) The league has also capped spending in the draft and international amateur markets, meaning Cohen is somewhat limited in how much he can dispense to players.

But he can invest in them in other ways, so increasing staffers' pay just seemed like good business. The team commissioned an industry-wide study in late 2020 and quickly realized Alderson's suspicions were correct. The Mets decline to speak specifically about figures, but one person familiar with the outcome says that by the following spring, "the overwhelming majority" of employees had received a salary bump. Alderson refuses to take credit for the increases but says several people told him the raise had been "life-changing."

Perhaps obviously, it also improved morale. "Lots of people are willing to do whatever it takes, including work for nothing or for a small amount to get their foot in the door," Alderson says. "But eventually it wears off. Eventually it becomes a job. A job with a certain amount of cachet, but you can't eat cachet and you can't support a family on cachet. So at some point you owe

JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES

MAXIN' OUT

Signing Scherzer (21) to a record deal showed that the Mets—whose payroll is north of $262 million—are willing to spend owner Cohen's money (far left).

it to your employees. If you're going to demand excellence, then you have to be prepared to acknowledge it."

The Mets have not always demanded excellence. Sometimes they almost seem to court the opposite. Few fans have suffered as many excruciating, confounding blows as the ones in Flushing. But during Cohen's introductory press conference, he said he wanted to create a culture of "professionalism and integrity." Alderson says they are achieving that goal using "resources and rigor." And indeed they are one of the best teams in the National League and are poised to make the playoffs for the first time since 2016. Most surprising of all, they have been . . . a normal baseball team. There have been no ridiculous stories sucking the oxygen out of the room for weeks at a time. Can this possibly continue? Are attitude, personnel and money—and one competent season—enough to erase decades of dysfunction? And what happens when the Mets stop being the Mets?

IT'S NOT EASY to be the orange-haired stepchild in a market that also contains a 27-time champion. The Mets make it harder. Since Wilpon took control of the team in 1987, the club has tweeted more photos of dildos (1) than it has won titles (0).

Wilpon became sole owner in 2002; since then scarcely a year has gone by without a uniquely Metsy catastrophe. Some of the most notable: In '07 the team led the division by seven games with 17 to play, then missed the playoffs. In '09 VP of player development Tony Bernazard tore off his shirt and challenged the Double A Binghamton Mets to a fight. In May '18 Citi Field caught fire while the team was on a road trip. Four months later players fled the Fenway Park visitors dugout midgame to escape a rat.

In 2019, lefthander Jason Vargas threatened to fight a reporter. It took manager Mickey Callaway two press conferences to hone his apology for cursing at the same reporter. Callaway was fired after the season; a year later, *The Athletic* reported that five women recounted sexual harassment by him. The team replaced him with Carlos Beltrán, then promptly fired him, too, after he was implicated in the Astros' sign-stealing scandal.

In some ways, even under new ownership, they remain the Mets of yore. Cohen's first GM, Jared Porter, was fired after ESPN reported that he had sent explicit, unwanted text messages to a female reporter; the man who replaced him, Zack Scott, was fired after he was arrested for allegedly driving under the influence after leaving a team fundraiser. (Scott was later acquitted of the charges.) A review of workplace culture conducted by law firm WilmerHale, hired in March 2021, led to the dismissal of the heads of the legal department and human resources that June.

In May 2021, the players invented a fictional hitting coach, Donnie Stevenson, and began attributing their successes to him; two days later, the team fired actual hitting coaches Chili Davis and Tom Slater. A few days after that, shortstop Francisco Lindor reportedly grabbed second baseman Jeff McNeil by the throat in the tunnel behind the dugout during an argument over defensive positioning. After the game, Lindor lied to reporters that the two had seen a rodent and discussed whether it was a rat or a raccoon. In August, amid a 9–19 stretch, Lindor, second baseman Javier Báez and outfielder Kevin Pillar began booing the fans back by flashing a thumbs-down whenever they succeeded—which was not often. The team finished 77–85 and missed the playoffs for the fifth straight year.

This winter, the team's reported first choice to replace Scott was former Nationals assistant GM Adam Cromie, a mergers and acquisitions lawyer in Pittsburgh who has been out of the game for half a decade. (Alderson eventually settled on Billy Eppler, who was the Angels' GM from 2015 through '20.)

And the Mets' relationship with the media remains uncomfortable at best. The team initially agreed to make several front-office staffers available for interviews for this story before rescinding that access, saying that Alderson could speak for them. The team also declined to make Cohen available, explaining that he was busy with what some Mets employees refer to as his “day job,” running Point72, his new hedge fund. A spokesperson did provide a statement from Cohen: “This isn't the time for a victory lap as we need to stay focused on the rest of the season, but I couldn't be more proud of the team and the energy of the fans at CitiField [*sic*] is electric.”

Certainly Cohen brings his own dysfunction. In addition to the insider trading, his firm has at least twice been the subject of grievances filed by female employees with the Connecticut Commission of Human Rights and Opportunities, and another woman sued Point72 for gender discrimination. (According to someone familiar with the situation, both grievances and the lawsuit have been settled for undisclosed terms. Point72 has denied all claims.) The bestselling *Black Edge*, by Sheelah Kolhatkar, which chronicles the downfall of SAC, paints a picture of a mercurial man who rose to the top of his industry by choosing which rules to follow. His image among baseball fans as an avuncular goofball in a half-zip, taking suggestions on Twitter to bring back Old Timers' Day and throwing money around, has served to sportswash his legacy as a Wall Street villian. Indeed, in '11, when Senator Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) began complaining loudly that the SEC was letting SAC operate suspiciously, Cohen sent some of his executives to Grassley's office to try to placate him. “Steve is very civic-minded,” Michael Sullivan, now Cohen's chief of staff, told Grassley's staffers, according to Kolhatkar. “He's thinking about taking a stake in the New York Mets.”

POOLER BEAR PETE

Alonso's contributions extend well beyond the batter's box: The All-Star slugger also was able to procure a billiards table for the clubhouse.

So it's hard to blame righty Chris Bassitt for the alarm he felt upon being traded to New York from the A's in March. “It sounded like it was a mess,” he says. “Then I got to spring training and was like, ‘Oh, this isn't like that at all.’ ”

STANDING AT HIS locker at Nationals Park on the afternoon of the trade deadline, Lindor rolls his eyes remembering last season's absurdities. “There were so many different things last year,” he says. “It wasn't a professional organization, I felt like.”

Lindor played 2021 under the weight of a 10-year, $341 million contract signed before he stepped onto the field in Queens. He had spent his entire career to that point in Cleveland, and he says he struggled to adapt to the expectations of New York.

This year's group is different, he says: “Guys go about their business the right way—you ain't gotta worry about it—and then once they're done, they turn the page. Professional. I like that.”

Most people around the team trace the change to the same place. Righty Taijuan Walker sums it up as well as anyone: “It starts with Buck.”

Buck Showalter, who in December replaced

“IF IT’S IMPORTANT TO THE PLAYERS, *regardless of how trivial it is,* IT BETTER BE IMPORTANT TO YOU,” SHOWALTER SAYS.

Luis Rojas as manager, was just a few days into his new job when he visited Citi Field for the first time. He ran into Alex Cohen, Steve’s wife.

“What do you think?” she asked him.

He briefly demurred, then waved at the blue walls. “It’s too dark,” he said. “And all these [inspirational] sayings can go.”

Nine months later, ensconced in his office, he still shakes his head at the idea.

“I have never said, ‘Man, I became a better player because of something I read Winston Churchill say, or Aristotle,’ ” he says. “Oh wow, I’m supposed to try?” He says he wants to read only one saying: “Play better.”

But Showalter is not quite the red-ass baseball lifer these lines would suggest. He mostly avoids the clubhouse, striding quickly through it with his head down when he needs to enter, because, he says, “That’s the players’ locker room.” He moved all the support staff out and had a large closet turned into a locker room for them, complete with a nearby bathroom so they did not need to traipse over to the bat kids’ area in towels and shower shoes. When the ballpark operations staff asked what they should do with all the equipment that had previously been stored there, Showalter shrugged. “Put it outside my office,” he said. “I don’t care.” So for months, the likely NL Manager of the Year squeezed past dozens of rubber bins on his way to work.

In July, when first baseman Pete Alonso started to ask whether it would be O.K. to add a pool table to the clubhouse, Showalter did not let him finish his sentence before saying yes. “If it’s important to the players, regardless of how trivial it is, it better be important to you,” Showalter says.

He also tries to influence what is important to them. He spent much of spring training drilling rules most of them had never considered and has spent much of the season reaping the benefits. For example: If an opponent was discussing appealing a play in which a runner left third base too early and there was another runner on base, Showalter said, the other runner should try to steal a base. If the opponent tried to throw him out, the team would no longer be able to appeal because the ball would’ve been put back into play.

In April, the Diamondbacks were considering appealing a sacrifice fly when infielder J.D. Davis (now with the Giants), standing on first, took off for second. Pitcher Oliver Peréz took a step toward second—negating the right to appeal—then threw to third. The run stood, and Davis was on second.

Showalter also tries to leaven the grind of a baseball season with witticisms delivered in his Florida drawl. Before a game earlier this month, he broke his clubhouse rule to ask players one by one, for no apparent reason, whether they had ever tried one of his favorite snacks. “He was just aghast that nobody eats boiled peanuts,” says reliever Trevor May.

In late July, Showalter felt it would be unhelpful to give his players the standard rah-rah speech before they faced NL Cy Young candidate Sandy Alcantara of the Marlins. “Listen,” he said instead. “We can’t beat this guy. He’s great. He’s probably gonna win every award. Let’s go have some fun and nobody get hurt and kind of take in how great he is. I don’t even know why we’re going out there. Just go listen to the

LINDOR
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Mets
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MARK OF MATURITY

Canha (near left, celebrating with Lindor) was one of the veterans New York brought in to create a culture of "professionalism and integrity."

anthem and have some fun." The hitters howled with mock indignation.

That night, the Mets chased Alcantara after five innings and four runs and won 6–4.

DURING THAT SAME GAME, Alonso dove headfirst into first base, where he was called out and narrowly avoided hurting himself. Lindor was waiting for him when he returned to the dugout.

"Hey," he said. "Appreciate the effort, but . . . "

Lindor did not say anything else. He did not need to. Alonso got the message. So did anyone else who overheard: *We play smart here.*

Bassitt noticed and privately applauded. He worried when he arrived in New York that his new teammates did not share his emphasis on accountability. "I knew the names, but I didn't know the personalities, so I didn't know who could handle what," he says. "Overall, I think, we have a locker room full of guys that like to be pushed, and that's exciting. I think that's honestly one of the biggest reasons why we're good this year."

The front office hoped to cultivate that environment with the acquisitions made last winter. The Mets let Báez, Pillar, righty Marcus Stroman and right fielder Michael Conforto walk in free agency, and spent a quarter of a billion dollars bringing in Max Scherzer, outfielder Starling Marte, third baseman Eduardo Escobar and outfielder Mark Canha, and traded for Bassitt.

Often leading the professionalism parade is Scherzer. The 38-year-old righthander encourages his teammates to come up to him in the moments following his outings and tell him what they saw. "This game will find any little situation to beat you with," Scherzer says, "and you can lose ballgames if you don't think of everything." This idea has taken hold; the Mets' starting pitchers now dissect one another's appearances in the dugout during games. "The best part is it's not just one guy," Bassitt says. "We have five veteran pitchers. So every pitcher is basically licking their chops. That's the funniest part about the whole thing: It's not, like, Max and four rookies, where Max is the guy, so we're all basically looking at Max and Jake [deGrom] and those guys and saying, like, 'Please mess up so we can jump down your throat.' "

Scherzer is the only member of the team who has won a World Series, so his word carries even more weight than his contract (three years, $130 million; the largest average annual value ever for a pitcher) or his career (eight All-Star selections, three Cy Young awards) might suggest.

"To be quite honest with you, I don't know what it takes" to win a championship, Bassitt says. So when Scherzer told him that even as his body grows sore down the stretch, he should throw his Day 2 bullpen on Day 2 rather than pushing it back to Day 3, Bassitt listened.

"We're not trying to play until the end of September," Bassitt says. "We're trying to play until November."

WHEN THE METS returned from a 10-game, three-city West Coast swing in June, a gift was waiting for them: a pitching machine made by the Canadian company Trajekt that can replicate any pitcher's exact delivery and repertoire. The device, which six other major league clubs also own, costs in the low six figures annually for a three-year license. The team had already expanded the batting cage, offered bat fittings, begun measuring players' grip strength and installed devices in the weight room to track players' explosiveness and identify when they need to rest.

"Anything that has value to make us better they're all for," says center fielder Brandon Nimmo. "It's a business, and sometimes you can go out and buy the better equipment, and it makes working a little bit easier."

Pitching coach Jeremy Hefner raves about the "human capital"—where he once spent mornings combing through data and afternoons working with players, he can now ask any of 20 analytics staffers to run reports for him. The front office increased to 57 people in this spring from 32 in 2020 (before the pandemic hit).

One popular change has been upgrading the facility in which the hitters and pitchers hold their pregame meetings. The team added stadium seating and two televisions, one for video and one for reports, plus a blue-and-orange barber pole outdoors that lights up when the room is in use.

"That's not hardware or software," says Alderson. "But it's creating an environment in which professional communication is appreciated. It used to be we'd meet in the lunchroom and it'd be a bunch of grab-ass and what have you. This is all business."

A FEW TIMES A YEAR, the Mets whine about their broadcasters. Gary Cohen, Keith Hernandez and Ron Darling work for SNY, the regional network that is majority-owned by the team, but the crew criticizes the players as lustily as any local columnist.

They will cheerfully spend innings berating a defender for being out of position on the wheel play or grumbling about a pitcher's slow pace. Their candor endears them to fans. It often has the opposite effect on the players, who cannot understand why three men who fly on the team plane seem not to root for the team. They complain quietly, and sometimes not so quietly.

Showalter addressed this issue early in the season. "They're not our enemy," he says. "I said, 'Guys, you control that.' "

Remarkably, there have been no fights with the broadcasters this season. But that's not because of Showalter's speech, nor is it because the team is playing well; the players still dislike criticism, and the Mets' poet laureates have still found plenty to criticize. No, the reason for the harmony is much simpler: Showalter muted all the televisions in the clubhouse.

Sometimes it's not about attitude or money or personnel. Sometimes it's about turning down the noise. ◻

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SEAN TAYLO

HE PLAYS For

IT'S BEEN NEARLY 15 YEARS SINCE STAR **GABRIEL TAYLOR** *IS DOING ALL HE CAN TO HONOR HIS*

BY
ALEX
PREWITT

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ARTURO
OLMOS

Sean

WASHINGTON SAFETY SEAN TAYLOR'S DEATH. NOW, BROTHER'S FOOTBALL LEGACY, WHILE TRYING TO CREATE ONE OF HIS OWN

In his most intimate moments of mourning, when no one but ghosts were watching, Gabriel Taylor would bring his big brother back to life. It's a ritual that started when he was 9 years old. He would put on the football helmet and scowl behind its rainbow-tinted visor, stalking from room to room like the floor was a defensive backfield. He would sneer through its gold facemask, barking trash talk across an invisible line of scrimmage. He would slap its burgundy shell, crouch into a ready stance and wiggle his fingers, eager to pounce. "Just walking around the house, acting like him," Gabriel says. "Getting into that mode, that mindset . . . where he did his thing."

Almost 15 years have passed since Sean Taylor was killed by a burglar at age 24, on Nov. 27, 2007, in the middle of his fourth NFL season with Washington. In that time, his little brother has never shied away from the shadow Sean left behind. Growing up, Gabriel played on a Miami-area youth football team that honored Sean by putting his name on the back of every player's jersey. In high school, at nearby Gulliver Prep, he competed on Sean Taylor Memorial Field. And today, as a third-year sophomore at Rice, he proudly wears Sean's college number, 26, while manning the same safety position.

Gabriel keeps his late brother close to him on campus in Houston: He sleeps with a souvenir towel hanging over his headboard, from the day Washington retired Sean's jersey, and before departing for every game he taps a decal of Sean's smiling face on the wall. "Then I do this," the younger Taylor says, curling his thumb and ring fingers while straightening the other three to form Sean's NFL number, 21. "Then I walk out."

Visiting his parents in South Florida means paying tribute at the shrine of memorabilia on permanent display. There are trophies, medals and footballs cluttering multiple bookshelves; grass-stained uniforms behind glass frames; and at least one of Sean's durags. Still, no item connects the 21-year-old Gabriel with his brother's legacy quite like the game-used Washington helmet. The chinstrap became tougher to buckle as puberty hit. ("My head's too big," Gabriel says.) But the private ritual of wearing it continued apace through his adolescence, until he left for college. "Knowing that I have that," he says, "it means a lot."

Part of the reason is that wearing it helps him tap into who Sean was as a player: a tireless worker, a top-notch talent, a downhill force with a devil-may-care style that put the fear of God into ballcarriers. It also reminds Gabriel of the player Sean believed his little brother would become.

GABRIEL WAS BORN on Sept. 27, 2001, the same Thursday that Sean—then a true freshman at Miami, starting on special teams for his hometown team—made a trio of tackles in a road win over Pittsburgh. Despite the 18-year age gap between the brothers (who share a father, Pete Taylor, and have different mothers), an instantaneous bond was formed. "The first time Sean held Gabe, he cradled him like a football and was like, 'Oh my God, am I doing it right?' " says Gabriel's mother, Simone Taylor. "I remember [Sean] looking at him and thinking he was so cute."

Riddell
REDSKINS
21
75

21
SEAN TAYLOR

IN SEAN'S DAY

Gabriel and his family traveled to Washington last October as the team honored Sean's memory.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES; ARTURO OLMOS; JOHN MCDONNELL/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

It wasn't long before Gabriel begged to tag along with Sean and Pete on their famous guerilla workouts. So he would sprint next to Sean on highway shoulders, lug tires at bus depots and run ladders through the sands of West Palm Beach. His first tackle football game came at age 4, against opponents two years older. "He always knew that's what he wanted to do," Simone says.

Early on, Gabriel couldn't pronounce Sean's name, instead calling him "Ton." It was also a good metric for how much he idolized his brother. After Washington drafted Sean with the fifth pick of the 2004 draft, Pete and Simone bought Gabriel a child-sized burgundy helmet, shoulder pads, a No. 21 T-shirt and a pair of cleats. "He'd wear that whole outfit and run around, tackling everything and everyone," Simone says.

Sean, in his day, was a defensive back with a rare blend of size and speed, his play earning him NFL All-Decade honors. But he was best known for his full-throated physicality. And, often, Gabriel was adamant about embracing that style; one time Simone returned home to find Gabriel bleeding from a sizable cut after crashing through a glass table. Simone says, "He was like, 'Don't worry; I was trying to tackle the couch cushions and I hit my head, but I'm fine!' "

A reclusive type who gave few interviews, Sean betrayed little to the public beyond a hard-edged exterior that occasionally went over the line. (See: his second-half ejection from a January 2006 playoff game against the Buccaneers for spitting in running back Michael Pittman's face.) Those close to him, however, recall a tender side, especially when it came to his brother. "He loved Gabriel because he was looking at his Mini-Me," Simone says. Asked what memories are sharp from their time together, Gabriel replies, "Of course, workouts. Video games. And this Easter party, I was running around playing hide-and-go-seek, and all of a sudden, someone dunks a ball on this hoop, and it starts to come down on me. And the first person who ran to catch it was Sean. He saved me. I'll never forget that."

Gabriel attended most of Sean's pro games, Simone says, notably that 2006 wild-card contest at Tampa Bay when, in the first half, Sean recovered a fumble for a touchdown and handed it to Gabriel in the stands. "It was like he was passing that baton," Simone says. Thanks to his busy in-season schedule, Sean wasn't able to watch Gabriel play much in person. But he evidently saw enough promise at their workouts with Pete to make a bold prediction, telling Simone once, “Gabriel’s gonna be great, because when I was his age, I was so uncoordinated; I couldn’t do the same things he’s doing. For real, he’s just different.”

“He saw something in me that I never saw,” Gabriel says. “But he never told me that before he passed away.”

ONE SUNDAY MORNING when Gabriel was almost 7, the bleary-eyed boy appeared in the door frame of his mother’s bedroom with a coloring book and a heavy heart.

This was the summer of 2008, nine months after Sean died from gunshot wounds suffered during a late-night burglary attempt at his home in the Miami suburb of Palmetto Bay, where he was visiting his fiancé, Jackie García, and his baby daughter, Jackie.

“I wish Sean was here,” Simone recalls Gabriel saying as he climbed into her bed and began to draw. “Because if he was here, I could’ve been the artist and he could’ve been the baller.”

“You can *still* be an artist,” Simone countered. “Sean would’ve wanted you to be whatever you wanted.”

“No, Mommy; you don’t understand,” Gabriel replied. “When I’m running, I feel him running with me. When I hit, I feel him in my chest. When I catch, I feel him in my arms. Sean wants me to be great.”

As with everyone close to Sean, his death required a degree of processing. “I remember looking around at the funeral, wondering why everyone was crying,” Gabriel says. “I didn’t understand death.” But when reality eventually hit, it landed with brute force. Simone remembers it distinctly: “Gabriel was on the laptop,” she says. “All of a sudden I heard him start bawling, and he was pointing to the screen. He was [watching] some of Sean’s highlights. And he was realizing that his brother wasn’t coming back.”

Soon enough, though, Gabriel was sprinting toward Sean’s dream for him. By his 10th birthday he was already well versed in football film study, regularly requesting that his parents tape his Pop Warner games so he could pore over the footage; in middle school he once drew the ire of an especially stern teacher by retreating to the back of the classroom to crank out push-ups after having finished his assignment. “He’d wake up early in the morning,” Simone remembers, “and say that if he’s not working, some other little kid is getting better than him.”

That effort paid off in part when Gabriel was named one of five finalists for the 2014 SI KIDS SportsKid of the Year award, having scored 13 touchdowns on 900 total yards as a running back while breaking up 10 passes as a defensive back in six games. As SI KIDS noted at the time, “[Gabriel] says he honors his big brother by ‘staying focused and giving my all on the field.’ ”

Years later, in the course of getting to know Gabriel, Rice assistant coach Cedric Calhoun would reach a similar conclusion. *Eventually.* In 2019, Calhoun, whose recruiting territory includes Sean’s old Miami turf, was scouting at Gulliver Prep when talk turned to the namesake of the school’s stadium, Sean Taylor Memorial Field. Recalls Calhoun: “The coach [Earl Sims] is a really good friend, and he goes, ‘Hey, Ced, I want to show you something.’ He puts

STEPPING UP

After struggling early, Gabriel became a force in Rice’s secondary in 2021.

HE HAD HIS NUMBER

Gabriel wore the familiar 21 on his jersey during his days as a youth football star in Miami.

RAZORBACKS
21
21

on some tape. After three or four plays, he pauses it and goes, '*That's* Sean's brother.' I said, 'Hell naw, are you serious? Sean has a brother?!' "

Gabriel, a three-star recruit, had flown under the radar in part because he was on the small side for a safety—today he's listed at 5' 10" and 190 pounds, compared to Sean's 6' 2", 212. More than that, though: He stopped playing football for three years to focus on what he considered his best sport, basketball. (He was nominated for the 2020 McDonald's All-American game and recorded a quadruple double in one game during his final season.)

Gabriel always knew, though, that he'd return to football, and when he suited up for Gulliver as a senior he returned five of his 10 interceptions for touchdowns. His motivations were crystallized for Calhoun when the assistant returned to Miami for an official home visit. Calhoun, who lived two miles from Sean's old house in Palmetto Bay when the safety was killed, knew Sean's story well by then, and "just seeing the shrine they had for Sean," he says, "that was enough."

"He plays in [Sean's] memory. He walks this life representing his family and his brother, no doubt."

WHAT THE HECK *is the Jim Thorpe Award?* The question was gnawing at Gabriel last October, coming off a career performance—10 tackles, a forced fumble and a pass breakup in a big win over Conference USA foe Alabama-Birmingham—that earned him Jim Thorpe Player of the Week honors as the nation's best defensive back. Sharing the news with his parents over the phone, Gabriel listened with awe as Pete explained that as a junior at Miami, Sean himself had been named a finalist for the season-long version of the Jim Thorpe Award . . . but that he ultimately finished second (behind Oklahoma's Derrick Strait). A year later, considering which football accomplishments most make him feel like he's living up to Sean's legacy, Gabriel cites this moment first.

That honor also marked a turning point after a stormy start to his college career, beginning with four weeks of isolation in summer 2020 due to a positive COVID-19 test. Secluded in a dorm room, with barely any natural light and with meals dropped outside his door, Gabriel says he shed upward of 20 pounds—and a bit of his drive. "I had time to sit and think, *Dang, what am I even doing here?*" he says. And similar doubts haunted him throughout that pandemic-stunted season, in which he recorded just five total tackles in Rice's five games, while his parents watched all of them from the stands. "I had to get serious and mature up," he says. "I couldn't have [my parents] coming and I'm doing nothing on the field."

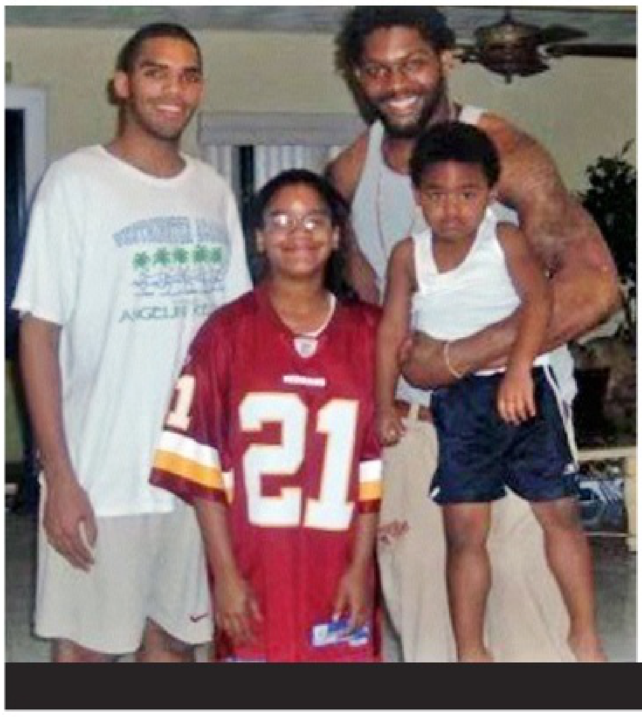
Here again he channeled Sean, willing himself to work out three times a day before he reported to training camp for his second season at Rice. Fitting, then, that Gabriel's breakout, against UAB, came on the heels of an intensely emotional week of tribute.

It started the previous Saturday, after a road shutout loss to Texas–San Antonio, when Gabriel and his parents drove an hour up Interstate 10, napped for an hour at a hotel and eventually caught a red-eye flight that landed in Washington around 6 a.m. From there the family was chauffeured straight to FedExField for the retirement of Sean's No. 21 jersey.

Nothing could taint that celebration. Not the sleep deprivation. Not the fact that Washington hadn't bothered to tell the Taylors about the ceremony until four days before. (Team officials later apologized.) Snapping pictures with fans that afternoon, signing autographs, basking in the sea of burgundy 21 jerseys, "It all felt like home," Gabriel says.

Jetting back to Houston that same night, Gabriel made it back for Monday's practice and soon learned that he would be making his first collegiate start that Saturday, against UAB. "And he balled out,"

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF RICE ATHLETICS; COURTESY OF THE TAYLOR FAMILY



safeties coach Colin Spencer says, pointing to "one of the best forced fumbles I've ever seen," in which the safety missed an open-field tackle yet still managed to chase down the ballcarrier and punch the football free. Defensive coordinator Brian Smith, meanwhile, cites another sequence that "looked like he was shot from a cannon" as Gabriel's high mark of the game, charging from the secondary to make a stop near the line of scrimmage.

But no single play has defined where Gabriel is headed more than a victory-clinching interception that he snared against Louisiana Tech a month later, on the 14th anniversary of Sean's death. Before that game Gabriel had been uncommonly quiet, retreating to his locker to ruminate with a towel draped over his head. But when the pick settled in his hands he dropped to the ground and burst into tears. "I just felt like I couldn't lose," Gabriel says. "Like it was all happening."

ONE AFTERNOON IN early August, over lunch at a favorite off-campus poke bowl spot, Gabriel opens the YouTube app on his phone and enters a familiar search: "Sean Taylor highlights." Scrolling through the results, he finds an hourlong compilation of his brother's college clips that he estimates he has seen 50 times and a shorter one from Sean's rookie season, to which he has contributed 60 of its nearly 600,000 views. Then he comes across another, titled "Sean Taylor—Gone But Not Forgotten."

"I can't finish this one," Gabriel says. "The music comes, and I blank out, and then I start crying."

He mostly watches to stir the memories but also to glean some tips. Gabriel's basketball background has helped in certain respects on the gridiron—specifically, natural man-to-man coverage skills that have allowed Smith to deploy him in a hybrid nickel role against an opponent's best slot receiver—and his tackling took a big leap forward in 2021 after a so-so freshman season, coaches say. But the biggest things still missing from his toolbox are lateral speed between the hash marks and, most importantly, Sean's calling card: a destructive downhill mentality. "It's how he played, like he had no fear on the field," Gabriel says. "And he's gonna let you know that he's there."

But football's culture has also changed, in large part as a response to increased player safety concerns from the type of hits that Sean used to dole out. ("Nah, you can't do that no more," Taylor says. "It's two-hand touch now.") So Gabriel huddles several times each week with Spencer, his position coach, poring over tape of the Saints' Tyrann Mathieu, the Chargers' Derwin James and other elite DBs. "My instinct is to get the ball. [Sean's was] more to hit you as hard as he can," Gabriel says. "So, I'm trying to take everything I can from him—and then bring it into the new generation."

"WHEN I'M RUNNING, MY CHEST," YOUNG GABRIEL

As that quest continues—a new chapter began Sept. 3, as Rice opened against USC, with new coach Lincoln Riley—a past generation is right by his side: Whereas Sean, as a rookie, once asked his father for help studying film of Randy Moss before facing the Vikings, today Pete has saved the password for Gabriel's account on the scouting database Hudl so that he can chime in with advice during game weeks. "Our scouting days are Tuesday, so by Monday my dad already knows who's fast, who's not, what their tendencies are," Gabriel says.

And when Gabriel returns to South Florida on break from school, he's often accompanied by a small flock of fellow Owls who stay at the family house and train under Pete's supervision, at a nearby gym. "He knows where he wants to go, where he's headed," Pete says. "It just reminds me of the other boy."

No matter what Gabriel accomplishes on his own, he knows that the comparisons and references to Sean, who would have turned 40 next April, will never fully cease. And that not every invocation comes from a positive place. When he was 8, in his first Pop Warner season, Gabriel and his fellow Florida City Razorbacks were outfitted in new gear by the rapper Timbaland, a family friend, including those custom jerseys bearing Sean's name. "I remember one time I had four

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF THE TAYLOR FAMILY; TONI L. SANDYS/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

touchdowns in the first quarter and a kid was like, 'You're gonna die like your brother,' " Gabriel says. Flash forward a decade and he shares a screengrab of a recent Instagram message in which a troll referenced Sean, writing, "N---- got shot and that's why [you're] tearing yo acl not going pro."

More than the sporadic hate, though, Gabriel is fueled by the steady love that people continue to carry for his brother and what his memory stands for—another example of which will come Nov. 27, before a Week 13 matchup against the Falcons, when Washington plans to unveil what Simone says the family has been told will be a "statue of some sort" as part of a ceremony honoring the 15th anniversary of Sean's death. "If I was a regular kid they're not gonna refer to Sean," Gabriel says. "But it's cool if I'm in a box with him, because [if people compare us] I'm doing something right. . . . Everybody wants to be Sean. So if you was half of Sean, you'll be great."

True to Sean's style, Gabriel doesn't plan to stop short of his target: In addition to helping the Owls secure their first winning record and reach their first bowl game since 2014 this season, the safety's sights are set on even bigger prizes downfield. "Jim Thorpe [Award], that's my main goal," he says. "[And] I want to wear 21 for the Commanders. That would be the cherry on top of the cake."

But before all that Gabriel has one more thing to do. He wants to buy a set of LED lights for his bedroom, where he will string them above the decal of a smiling Sean so that they spell out a single word: LEGACY. □

I FEEL HIM RUNNING WITH ME. WHEN I HIT, I FEEL HIM IN
TOLD HIS MOTHER. **"SEAN WANTS ME TO BE GREAT."**

HOLDING ON

Off the field, Sean was happy to clutch onto Gabriel (opposite) like he did one of his fumble return touchdowns (left).

Ro

IAN MACKAY

WAS PARALYZED 14 YEARS AGO IN A BIKE CRASH, BUT HE'S COME TO SEE THERE'S HAPPINESS IN FINDING NEW WAYS TO EXPERIENCE OLD LOVES. IN HIS CASE, THAT MEANT GETTING BACK ON THE ROAD

WITH IT

BY JOSEPH BIEN-KAHN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JONATHAN FERREY

Long into the year's shortest night, muted light plays tricks on heavy eyes, and repetition can deceive a tired mind. Six times this group has completed the 12.29-mile counterclockwise loop: always south alongside the Willamette River, east past the pumpkin patch, north along the Columbia River before curling west near Sturgeon Lake and running south by the dairy farm and the cabbage patch, across the Gilbert River, and then, finally, back to base camp at the Sauvie Island Community Church parking lot.

By 4 a.m., the entire endeavor feels positively Sisyphean. Ian Mackay leads the procession, a small headlight secured to each side of his rig. For hours he's been flanked by his girlfriend, one of his former professors and a rotating cavalcade of friends and family on wheels. Mackay's father drives a trail car, dragging an arrow board, directing cars to pass on the left.

These riders form an unlikely constellation: educators, construction workers, salespeople and speech therapists wearing cycling jerseys, tutus and everything in between. They've been drawn to this island at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette, just north of Portland, by the gravitational pull of a 40-year-old wearing checkered Vans and a gray beanie, with a goatee and floor-length dreadlocks that are now braided in pigtails to keep from dragging. Fourteen years ago a bicycle crash left Mackay in a wheelchair. Now he and his co-riders—Mackay in an Invacare TDX SP2, the rest on bikes—embarked on these loops at 8 p.m. on June 21, the summer solstice, and they plan to keep circling at 8.5 mph, the fastest Mackay's ride can manage, until he sets the record for the greatest distance covered in 24 hours by a motorized wheelchair.

COURTESY OF IAN MACKAY

Mackay drives his sip-and-puff-powered chair with a straw that extends from above his right armrest: A hard puff starts him forward, a soft puff turns him to the right and a soft sip sends him left. On top of the challenge of executing these maneuvers while fatigued, Mackay can no longer regulate his body heat. If his temperature falls too far or climbs too high, it could be fatal. And then there's the risk of spasms, sores or infections from the long ride. (Since his incident, he hasn't sat for more than 12 consecutive hours.)

That, and there's the mental grind of it all. Dawn approaches, and Mackay struggles to keep his eyes on the monotonous road. As Camus wrote: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." By now Mackay's smile has faded. Still he rolls on.

As the sun seems to resist rising over the peak of Mount Hood, to the east, the resolve of those few people who've agreed to bike alongside Mackay for all 24 hours also begins to fade. In 2017, South Korea's Chang-Hyun Choi, who is paralyzed from the neck down, covered an unprecedented 173.98 miles in one day, in a mouth-controlled motorized wheelchair. To top Choi, and to put his own

LAP DAWGS

The goal for Ian (far left, with Teena) and his wheeled friends: 15 times around a 12.29-mile course in 24 hours.

[redacted]

name in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Mackay knows he must keep moving. To complete his goal of 15 laps around the island, to break the record and then some, he'll run up against that proverbial wall again and again. So, he defies that unceasing inner voice that says it's time to stop.

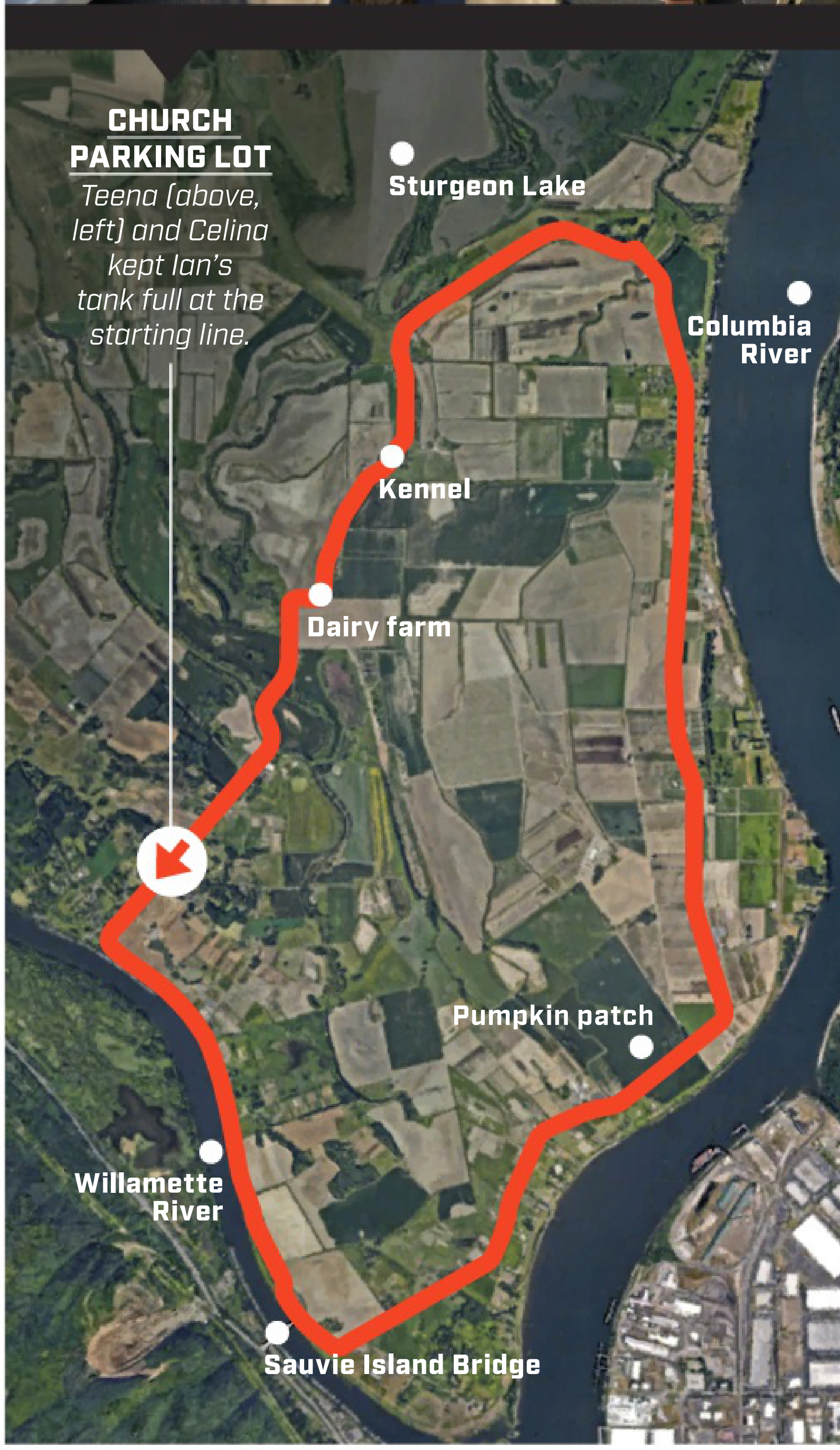
THE CAMPUS of UC Santa Cruz is nestled in the woods on Ben Lomond Mountain, overlooking the small Californian beach town. And where the tree cover opens, near the music center, there's a steep route down, called the Great Meadow Bike Path.

On June 4, 2008, Mackay—then a 26-year-old undergrad who'd already been through two community colleges before landing at Santa Cruz—headed home from his job as an assistant at the school's botany lab and started his descent. Each afternoon, on his commute, he kept an eye on his bike's speedometer, hoping to set a new personal record. "Forty-two [mph] was the fastest I could ever go—but I wanted to go a little faster every time," says Mackay, who would pedal over the lip and then go "full tuck," his hands gripping the seat post, "banzai-ing down that hill."

On this particular day, Mackay saw his readout hit 38 mph as he sped past a student housing cluster in the campus's lower quarry—and then his front wheel skidded on a patch of sand, sending him headfirst over the handlebars, into a tree. On impact, his helmet cracked and his C3, C4 and C5 vertebrae fractured. "I remember the sand. I remember leaving the bike and going towards the tree," Mackay says. "And then—it felt like seconds later—I remember lying underneath that tree, looking up and noticing I couldn't move or feel much of my body." A woman approached, and Mackay asked her to call an ambulance. EMTs arrived, put Mackay in a cervical collar and carted him to a helicopter that flew 30 miles to the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center.

Mackay recalls lying in a hospital bed, staff repeatedly sticking him with a safety pin, starting just above his navel and slowly moving up his body to see when he felt the prick. When he did, they'd stop and draw a line across his skin. The first was on his chest, right below the nipples—but they repeated the process every 15 minutes, and each time the line moved higher. Mackay now understands that his spinal cord was swelling, pushing paralysis farther up his body. "We have to intubate you," doctors told him, "because very soon your diaphragm will be paralyzed, and you'll no longer be able to breathe." Mackay closes his eyes as he returns to that day.

"It's weird to say, but there was a peacefulness. A serenity," he says. Why hadn't panic or shock overtaken him? "It felt so out of [my] control that worry or concern



CHURCH PARKING LOT
Teena (above, left) and Celina kept Ian's tank full at the starting line.

or stress or anger just didn't make sense at the time. It seemed big. It seemed significant. . . . But I knew on that day, I wasn't going to be able to change anything."

He wants to make this clear, however: That serenity didn't last. "With the realization of things—dealing with nurses and doctors, the lack of sleep, the pain and the f------ change of losing everything," Mackay says, tearing up—"that inner peace went away."

With his first call from the hospital, Mackay asked his roommate to feed his dog. Then he rang his mother, Teena Woodward, in Santa Barbara, a four-hour drive away. "I'm pretty hurt," he told her as a nurse held the phone to his ear. "You better get up here." Teena, then 45, frantically filled a suitcase and left in a blur.

Arriving a bit before dawn, she walked into what she calls "the freakiest, most out-of-this-world" scene. The room was dark, lit sparingly by the colored lights of all the machines. Her son lay splayed out, in a gown, with a ventilator tube in his throat. With his arms and legs strapped down at 45-degree angles, he evoked the *Vitruvian Man*.

Teena ran from one side of him to the other and back. "Tears were rolling down his eyes. Tears were rolling down my eyes," she says. Finally, she took a breath and composed herself. She understood then and there that her life was forever changed.

For the next three months, Teena spent every possible minute at her son's side, sleeping in a chair beside his bed. For the subsequent 14 years, she's been only a few steps away—or close enough to reach him with a phone call's notice. "I never left," she says.

Eventually that hospital room grew full, the air thick with frantic energy, love and sorrow. Waves of visitors—family, hippies, a poet, science professors from Santa Cruz—would roll in and out. All except one: Teena. She was always there, always locked on the eyes of her oldest son—"our only way to communicate," she says, "with our eyes." The boy she'd watched run and swim and bike could no longer move or breathe on his own. But he was still alive. Teena knew that more than anyone. More than Ian himself. She refused to look away.

UNDERNEATH A POP-UP tent in the church parking lot, two timekeepers on folding chairs record the exact time each lap starts, and every hour they log Mackay's mileage, radioed in from another rider. As the cavalcade turns the corner of Northwest Reeder Road and arrives at the church, the dark has paled into that sideways light of a rumored dawn. The biggest concern throughout the night, beyond Mackay dozing off and losing control, has been that his temperature might drop below 94°. Teena, waiting in the parking lot, has been heating tube socks full of rice in the church microwave, tucking them onto her son's lap for warmth; and Mackay's girlfriend, Celina Smith, long ago wrestled a fleece and a puffer jacket over his long-sleeve shirt. Earlier in the evening, his stepfather, Russ, tightened a seatbelt around Mackay while Teena took his temperature, which at the time registered 98°.

As Mackay completes his sixth lap, at 5:03 a.m., however, the thermometer shows 95.3°. In the church parking lot Teena tries to talk him into a 10-minute break; she has turned the heater all the way up in her white converted van and has the ramp down, ready for him to roll in. But Mackay, by now slightly punch-drunk, believes it's beyond fixing. The cold is in his bones, he says, and he must power through. Teena, just as stubborn as her son, holds back tears of frustration and concern. Finally, she tells him, "Talk to Dr. B."—Josh Blaustein, an old chemistry professor turned pal of Mackay's, along for the ride—"and your crew, because I'm not getting through," and she walks off.

Ian and Teena are strikingly close—"best friends," as Teena's mom, 81-year-old Bev Dawson, explains. After the crash, Ian came home with the physical capacities of a 6-month-old. That regressive state brought mother and son tighter than ever. It also returned to Teena something akin to that universal fear of a new parent. She had to retrain herself to trust that her son would be safe outside of her line of sight. And that took years.

This morning, as her son's temperature dangles on the edge of disaster, Mom ultimately gets her way. Smith and Blaustein convince Mackay to warm himself. "All right, I'll take 10 minutes," he says.

At 5:20, he rolls back out of the van, giving the weariest of smiles. The sun has crested past the mountains' peaks as the riders set off, back down Northwest Reeder Road for a seventh time.

THE FIRST YEAR after the crash was the worst of Mackay's life. He'd been 12 months from finishing school, with plans to do research in the canopies of temperate forests before pursuing a career as a community college professor. The loss of that imagined future, along with his movement and his breath, was shattering. When Teena rushed to his side, she and Russ had just retired; most of their things were already boxed for a move to Port Angeles, Wash. After they all left the hospital, three months later, they went north, to that new home and a new life. Ian's father, Zeke, quit his job in San Diego and came up with them, too. For the next five years, Teena, her husband, her son (sleeping in the adjacent room) and her ex (on a couch, or on a futon in Ian's room) all lived together in a two-bedroom house in the woods.

GOOGLE MAPS

Teena’s lasting image from those early days is of Ian sitting on the sofa in a robe or gown, buried beneath a blanket, illuminated by the light of the television, all of it soundtracked by the robotic beat of a ventilator—that vacuum inhale and then two thuds as the mechanical lung releases. For those first 12 months it was a chore to get a word out of Mackay. Doctors had implanted a breathing tube into his windpipe, and to speak was an uncomfortable ordeal: He had to deflate a cuff—a small balloon inside his throat that keeps air from escaping—then refill it with 7 ccs of water when he was done. Still, Teena knew it was more than just the cuff that kept him silent.

At the hospital, the mess of machines and nurses and visitors, and all the attendant planning, had kept the family in a fog. But now the solitude of rural Washington gave them the space to feel the weight of what they’d lost. “I remember talking about the fact that the grief was so bad, because it was as if he kept dying,” Teena says. “He was lost, and we just didn’t know where we were going.”

“A HUMAN BEING,” SOPHOCLES WROTE, “IS ONLY BREATH
MACKAY’S BREATH DESERTED HIM, **THE ONLY THING**

It didn’t help that Mackay was despondent and bitter. “I didn’t return the love I was being given,” he admits. “I was miserable.”

“A human being,” Sophocles wrote, “is only breath and shadow.” When Mackay’s breath deserted him, the only thing left had been a shadow. He’d spent his early 20s searching for a path, which he thought he’d finally found. He was confident and focused; everyone could see it. But then the crash dragged him home, into a haze of pain pills, grief and silence, his whole world reduced to a few rooms in the wilderness.

Finally, a year after the crash, a breakthrough: Rehabbing with an occupational therapist, Mackay thought he felt himself taking small breaths while working to raise his shoulders. One night, as a test, he asked Zeke to remove the ventilator and put a thumb over his throat, with the cuff deflated. When Mackay breathed on his own for more than a minute, “it gave me hope,” he says, and for the next month he experimented without the ventilator, until he no longer needed it during the day.

Doctors couldn’t explain it; it was and remains the only real gain Mackay has made since his injury. But once he got off the ventilator, his voice returned, and Teena could see the son she knew returning, too. During the voiceless year he would click his tongue to get Teena’s attention. “But now he’d yell, ‘Mom!’ and it was the most beautiful thing to hear,” she says. “When he started to talk, he started to come back to being Ian.”

As the fall of 2009 arrived, she noticed her son begin to turn from the TV to the living room’s tall windows. Mackay asked his parents to put a feeder on the sill, and he started to bird-watch—“that’s a dark-eyed junco . . . that’s a spotted towhee”—as he had in the days before his crash. Teena bought a copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, and they worked together to identify every bird on their five acres. Now, Ian kept one eye on the world outside.

TOUR DE FORCE

Sixteen years after Mackay (below, third from left) drove a support van for Blaustein, he led a new kind of ride.

COURTESY OF IAN MACKAY

Before Apple introduced Siri, in 2010, with its voice- and gesture-based controls, the biggest challenge for a quadriplegic, typically, was a simple one: how to press a button. Teena remembers her son's first stab at this, and how he practiced to perfection with a small headset that attached to a BlackBerry and allowed him to make a call with his sip-and-puff straw. And then: "His first adventure was to his grandparents' house, across the street," Teena says. "I called my mom three times to see if he was there yet. I was so, so worried."

Teena was still nearby, but that third-of-a-mile journey was a revelation. Her son could leave home alone again.

Mackay began exploring, and in turn he started to rediscover himself. He used a durable chair right out of rehab, and now he tested its limits as he ventured farther and farther down the 135-mile Olympic Discovery Trail that runs alongside his family's property. Teena would get calls that his battery had run out or that he'd tipped over or that his leg bag was full—but then she'd come find him, and he'd get back on his way again.

AND SHADOW." WHEN
LEFT HAD BEEN A SHADOW.

Blaustein, now 52, remembers how in the years before the crash his friend was so drawn to the outdoors and to adventure that he would often suffer from exposure to poison oak. They'd be hiking, and he'd see a plant off the trail and just dart toward it. Later, Blaustein would make the trip north to visit his friend whenever he could, and in that dark, silent living room he wondered how Mackay would ever find purpose again after being robbed of the means to explore.

Now, though, with Teena's help, the two friends could traverse the trails around the Mackay property. And it became clear that in doing so Ian could begin to heal the emotional scars of the crash.

Soon enough, he had covered the entirety of the Olympic Discovery Trail. "He [rode] the length of it, and then he said, 'Let's do the whole state of Washington,' " Teena says, grinning. "I'm like, 'You're out of your mind.' But he said, 'No, let's do it.' And so we did."

THE SUN SITS just above the horizon, and a belt of clouds covers the mountains in the distance. An old pickup truck, overflowing with cabbage, rolls onto the two-lane road. Traffic peaked right after sunset, but the rest of the night remained quiet. Now, Mackay's headlights shine around a corner, followed by Smith, Blaustein and a couple of other riders.

At 8:26 a.m., more than halfway into the ride, a skeleton crew pulls into the church lot, and the timekeeper asks the distance: 98.5 miles. Russ rushes over with a backup lithium wheelchair battery on a dolly and helps switch it in. Teena feeds her son a banana and a pill to limit his spasms. She takes his temperature and is elated to see it’s back up to 96.7°. For the first time, everyone allows themselves to believe Mackay might just finish.

Among the believers: Kenny Salvini, who arrives at the lot later in the morning with his wife and toddler. In 2004, Salvini was 23 and had just wrapped up a wrestling career at Central Washington when he broke his neck in a skiing incident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. For the next seven years he was a shut-in, spending half that time in bed battling sores.

“It’s a deep, dark hole,” he says. “You wake up wherever you wake up, and you’re looking at your arms and your feet that are no longer connected to your body, and it’s as close to a mental, emotional and spiritual crisis as there can be. I really had to mourn the guy that I was.”

Mackay met Salvini (“The Hot Quad,” as Smith insists he’s nicknamed) at a barbecue in 2012, on the anniversary of a mutual friend’s injury. Now, says his grandmother, “they’re like a couple of teenage girls. They’re on the phone all the time! They giggle!”

As a young man obsessed with all things kinetic—skiing, wrestling, wakeboarding—Salvini says he believed the mind and body were inextricably linked. But he’s since come to understand they’re distinct. “It’s so hard to wrap your head around [the idea] that there might be something else to it,” he says. “It’s a testament to the human spirit that you can go through so much and still find a way. That life still tries to find a way.”

Mackay remembers the beginning of his own struggle. That first week in the hospital, a friend played him a song by the late folk singer Guy Clark, “The Cape,” about a kid who leaps from his garage with a flour sack knotted around his neck, believing he can fly. He hits the ground but then keeps on leaping, over and over, until he’s old and gray. *Spread your arms and hold your breath / Always trust your cape.* It was too early for Mackay to take the lesson to heart, but the words lodged their way into his head.

Rediscovering your old self, Salvini explains, starts with finding that one thing that gets you out of the hole and fires you up again. You need to locate the why. For Salvini, it was people; he started going to support groups for quads, and it felt like he was on a team again. For Mackay, it was those daily rides down the Olympic Discovery Trail. Then, it was more.

JOSH BLAUSTEIN WAS instantly taken with the energy and magnetism of the dreadlocked student who walked into his chemistry classroom at Cabrillo Community College, near Santa Cruz, 18 years ago. The two became fast friends, attending concerts and going on hikes. Blaustein invited Mackay over for dinner, and he still remembers how effortlessly this student got his two young daughters excited about the natural world—birds and plants and so on.

In 2006, two years before the crash, Blaustein invited Mackay to drive the support van on a bike tour that he and some buddies were taking across Northern California. A year later, Mackay drove along again as the group traversed British Columbia. Mackay, who was just then getting serious about bicycling himself, says he loved those experiences—but quietly he wished that he, too, was on a bike, instead of in the van.

DANGER THINGS

Mackay’s main impediments, on and off Sauvie Island: traffic, tiredness at night and his own fluctuating temperature.

Later, in the first few years after his crash, Mackay hardly thought about that time on the road with his friend. But then Blaustein began to use the Port Angeles property as a sort of base camp for further tours of the northwest, and hearing stories from those trips rekindled in Mackay that bit of longing. "There was envy when I was in my chair," he says, "and they were heading off on this adventure."

Finally, in 2016, Mackay rang Blaustein and made a pitch: a 10-day, 335-mile bike-and-wheelchair tour from B.C. to Portland. Blaustein was in without a second thought, and that August they took a ferry north before setting off, staying along the way with friends that Mackay had met through quad support groups. ("Somehow, [Ian] planned it so every day ended at a brewery," Blaustein says with a laugh.)

In 2018 they hit the road again, riding the 476 miles from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, back to Port Angeles in 13 days. They climbed the Cascades and battled the heat of eastern Washington. Two years later, they took on a 272-mile route from Brookings, Ore., to Fort Bragg, Calif., over the course of one week, keeping the same max speed of 8.5 mph, up and down hills. As Mackay wrote on the blog for his nonprofit foundation, Ian's Ride: "This wheelchair is my bike. I am of the firm belief that more people, not just the mobility-challenged, should get outside and pursue a passion."

Much can go wrong on the road—especially for Mackay, even with his mom always trailing in a support van. Those rides are "hard, and they're beautiful, and they're draining and they're hysterical," Teena says through tears. Mackay wears layer upon layer to keep his body temperature up when it's cold out. More dangerous, though, is the heat; Mackay's temperature needs to stay below 102°. (To combat this, he rides with a shade canopy. And ice packs on his groin or under his armpits can usually bring his temp down.) Mackay can't feel pain—the signal gets deflected back to the source when it reaches his spinal lesion, before being sent again. This rapid pinging increases his blood pressure, and a headache or a hot flash is his clue that something is wrong somewhere in his body. "You have to become a detective and start figuring it out," he says.

Then there are the physical obstacles beyond his body. Rumble strips. Pouring rain. Logging trucks. Mackay recounts one ride on which he hit a rock on a narrow shoulder as he and Blaustein crossed a bridge, sending his chair into traffic. "Now I'm on the freeway, and there's this giant truck coming and hearing that truck swerving. F---, talk about adrenaline," Mackay says.

With all this risk, what is Mackay chasing on these adventures? "I didn't get to experience [the rides] before I was injured—but I sure as hell have now," he says. "Getting to actually live that experience I wanted so bad, and to do it in this unusual, quirky way—it's freaking awesome, man."

There's a lesson here that Mackay always shares with fellow quads: In the struggle to recover what is lost, we often forget to keep pursuing what we never had in the first place. It took him a while to learn this, but he knows it's been essential in finding himself again. "So many of us try to redefine who we are, but I think happiness lies in embracing the loves you always had and finding ways to do them in a different way," he says. "I don't think that your limitations should define what you love and what you pursue."

IT'S ALMOST 5 P.M. when I ride up beside Mackay. He's been on the same loop for 21 hours. He hasn't slept, and his hands have turned maroon from the sun. He's consumed just that banana, a few bites of an apple, a bit of a burrito and enough Ensures to unsettle his stomach. He says he never really sleeps much, but he's tired now in a way that feels novel.

Still, he knows: Two more laps and the record is his.

Mackay tells me of the uncanny feeling of transforming in an instant from an active 26-year-old to a man with the bodily functions of an infant. He was depressed, but he was angry, too. He'd been a year from graduation, ready to go "full tuck" down his own path, and then he went over the handlebars and he was back at home again. He felt cheated.

"There was so much anger, so much sadness, and I felt so much loss that I didn't want to talk," he says. "I [feared that] I would shout out at those who loved me the most, so it was safer not to speak." (Russ remembers it well: "He was a d--k, an a--hole. But you got to understand where he was coming from. He was pissed off.")

As we pass by the Sauvie Island Kennel, I ask Mackay how long it took to get back to where he'd been. He says it was a friend, Todd Stabelfeldt, whom he calls The Quad Father, who showed him he could keep on living after this kind of injury. It was Salvini, the type of guy he would've befriended even before his fall, who made him start to feel like his own man again. And it was Smith, a speech-language pathologist he met through her job, who has allowed him to imagine getting old. (After their first date three years ago, at the Space Needle, Ian and Celina now spend every weekend together, and she says: "When we're together, there aren't bad days. He is my medicine, in a way.")

HOW DID MACKAY FEEL AFTER HIS RIDE? "THERE'S A

"REFLECTIVE, INTENSE, AMAZED, GRATEFUL, LOVED,

Among ultrarunners and off-road racers there's a strong sense that the physical is less than half the battle in a daylong race. It's more about going full speed into your mental wall and breaking through, and then being resolute, even while knowing another wall is waiting, right down the road. The best are rarely the fastest, the strongest or the most technically skilled; often, they're just people unlucky enough to know real pain, which puts a race into context. At a certain distance, grit is the great differentiator. At a certain distance, talent is superseded by the ability to just go on.

Mount Hood peeks above the horizon to our left as Mackay tells me he's been repeating the phrase "embrace the misery." It's a mantra that any runner, cyclist or gym rat can relate to. But for Mackay, misery is a realized state. It goes beyond a bit of pain. He tells me he's too tired to keep talking about himself. He asks about my parents, my brothers, my dog. He asks about my due date, and I think he means for this story—but in fact he's remembered that my wife at home is pregnant. As we've been speaking, he's been wincing, but now that smile reappears. Could Sisyphus be happy? Mackay rolls on, at 8.5 mph, back toward the church parking lot.

LAP 14 ENDS, and Mackay is two miles from his goal, but the *Guinness* bylaws are vaguely written, so everyone agrees he must complete a 15th lap to break the record. Mackay sets off again a bit after 6 p.m., with the biggest crew yet—"his tribe," as Salvini puts it—riding by his side, and they all roll along Sauvie Island Road while the low light slides off the Willamette.

As they approach the Sauvie Island Bridge, Smith and Blaustein ride up alongside Mackay, each putting a hand on his canopy. Zeke slaloms through the crowd

of bikes on a Onewheel electric longboard and raises his hands. Everyone lets out a scream as Mackay's Strava ticks past 173.98 miles. Everyone except Teena. She's biking along now, in the middle of the pack, awestruck, trying and failing to stop the tears.

There are still 10 miles to go before the parking lot, but time is no longer a concern. Each lap has taken less than an hour and a half; Mackay just needs to finish this one in under two. Finally, at 7:30, he pulls in, greeted by a cheering crowd and cameramen from local news outlets and a documentary crew filming his feat.

Off to one side, Teena, Russ and Zeke observe Ian in wonder. Zeke asks, "Are we crazy?" Teena and her ex tear up and shake their heads.

A few days later, I text Mackay to see how he's feeling. "There's a wide mix," he writes. "Reflective, intense, amazed, grateful, loved, exhausted and strong."

WIDE MIX," HE SAYS.
EXHAUSTED AND STRONG."

WHEELS OF STEEL
Mackay, in his quest, repeated the phrase "embrace the misery," which for him is a realized state.

SO WHAT IS Ian Mackay chasing? He's open about his injury, his recovery, his relationships and his fears. He doesn't balk when detailing the day-to-day realities of his life, like needing someone to clean him and turn him in his sleep, to avoid bedsores, or the emotional hurdles of Smith being both his caregiver and his lover. He's introspective and relentlessly forthcoming. Still, he can't quite explain what drew him to risk his health for a record that no one, including himself, had ever thought about before he looked it up on a whim four years ago. Is he trying to prove how far he's come since escaping that dark room? Is he crafting an emblem of his independence? Or is it that intangible itch that all athletes need to scratch? His friends and family hem and haw at this question, crediting a desire to push himself, or maybe an innate need to explore. Some admit they've never thought much about it. When I ask Teena, she says I really should talk to Salvini.

Under the shade of an RV canopy, The Hot Quad tells me it's the same thing that made his friend put his hands behind his back to get that extra mile per hour down the hill on the Great Meadow Bike Path. "I've always joked that we don't get into [our condition] by making good decisions," he says. "Sometimes that doesn't change."

Salvini tells a story. It's 2014, the 10th anniversary of his crash, and he wants to ski down the fateful mountain to mark the day. So he gets to the top, and friends put him in a seated rig, tethered to another skier who'll act as his brakes.

"Well, my brake guy loses a ski and we rag-doll down the hill," Salvini says. "I've got on a GoPro, facing me, and [on the video] I look like one of those blow-ups at the car dealership with their arms flailing. For a second, I'm like, *Am I gonna get airlifted off this mountain again?* But they picked me up, righted the ship, and it was like, *Yeah, I'm not as fragile as I thought I was.*"

Recovery means regaining possession of something lost. But Mackay is past that; he's capturing something he didn't have before. So I try again, a bit differently: Are we all on Sauvie Island because Ian Mackay wants the world to see his place beyond recovery?

Salvini takes a moment. "There's a quote: Life begins at the end of your comfort zones. [Ian] is most definitely proving that," he says. "We need those reminders, that maybe our mind is the only thing that's limiting us. Maybe it's not just our bodies."

POINT AFTER

MORE OF THE SAME

It was the question of the season back on Opening Day: Could Shohei Ohtani do it? If *it* was "play in October," the answer is no: The Angels are headed for their seventh straight losing season. If *it* was "contend for another AL MVP award and keep challenging Babe Ruth for the mantle of best two-way player," we have a resounding yes. As August was ending Ohtani the hitter was one of the AL's five best offensive players (by OPS). Ohtani the pitcher was even better than he was in 2021, with a lower ERA, an improved walk rate and the best strikeouts per nine innings pitched mark in the majors. Oh, and he had joined the Babe as the only players with 10 home runs and 10 pitching wins in a season. This offseason will bring more questions: Can Ohtani hold off Aaron Judge *(page 44)* for the MVP? Where will Ohtani play next year? (Los Angeles considered dealing him at the trade deadline.) Those can wait. For now, just enjoy what's left of another historic season.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

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